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TUCSON TOM



OR,

THE FIRE TRAILERS.

BY GEORGE ST. GEORGE,
AUTHOR OF "DUNCAN, THE SEA DIVER,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

RED WOLVES OF THE BARRANCA.

A CAMP in a *barranca*.

The fire burned dimly, as though there were need of caution.

It was in the Apache country, and not more than twenty miles of level land lay between the dry water course dividing the plain, and the wild mountains, from the heart of which the dusky riders were wont to issue on their periodical raids against the cattle-raisers of the border.

The plain bordering the *barranca* was almost destitute of vegetable life.

Here a little cluster of cacti and prickly-pear might be seen, yonder a line of sage-

"NOW FOR IT, LITTLE GAL!" CRIED THE BOWIE BRAVO.

bushes, and perhaps a fringe of grass, which, dried by the torrid sun, presented no pleasing aspect to the sight.

This was the view by day.

At the time we come upon the camp in the *barranca*, night reigns supreme.

A light breeze sweeping up the old bed of an ancient watercourse, gives new life after the heat of the day.

It also carries on its wings sounds that are familiar to the ears of those who had spent years in this section—the voices of the southwestern plains.

The barking of the prairie-dog, the hooting of his friend the owl, and the howl of the prowling wolf—all these can be heard from time to time, and to the ears accustomed to their tuneful lay, the chorus makes pleasant music indeed.

Their sudden cessation would indicate approaching danger.

Near the little fire two figures might have been seen, a man and a woman, or rather girl.

The former was garbed after the Texan style, and presented a dashing appearance. The most noticeable thing about him seemed to be the trio of ugly-looking bowie-knives he carried in his belt.

In the use of this weapon he was the prince of prairie rangers.

By a wonderful movement of his arm, he could hurl one through the air with the speed and accuracy of a bullet, and woe to the man or beast whom it struck.

Tucson Tom was a character famous along the Rio del Norte, and in the Apache country. He was called the "Bowie Bravo" by the Mexicans, because their idea of a bravo meant a man who feared neither man nor devil, and such a reckless ranger was Tom.

His companion at the camp-fire was apparently an Indian maiden, for she was dressed in the Apache manner, and a casual glance would not have awakened any suspicions to the contrary.

A closer examination, however, might have revealed several things that would go to confirm the thought that she was possessed of other than Apache blood.

In the remote strongholds of the still fierce Indian tribes are to be found to-day numbers of children and young girls who have been carried away from their homes along the border during the Indian raids.

Many a family has mourned the loss of a child, carried off by the Apaches or Comanches when, like the eagle of the skies, without warning, and defying resistance, they suddenly swooped down upon the unprotected cabin home.

Occasionally some of these girls have been rescued from their captors, but more than once it has been only to find that the many years which have elapsed since the capture of the child have obliterated all memory of those who once loved her, so that to her mind the pale-faces were simply the enemies of her adopted people.

The girl in the *barranca* apparently differed from this class. She conversed with Tucson Tom partly in English, though at times drifting into Mexican, and it was evident that she was there of her own free will, and not as a captive.

Yet until within the last twenty hours this beautiful golden-haired girl had been the most carefully guarded object in the whole Apache village, for she was their Sun Priestess.

The Apaches are apparently connected, in some mysterious manner, with the old Aztecs, and to this day, in their secret councils are known as worshipers of the great sun-god.

Alone Tucson Tom had ventured into the hostile country and hovered about the Apache village until the opportunity came to see the girl about whom he was concerned.

When at length the ranger and his prize had fled, the pursuit had been hot and furious, by the incensed savages, and, were the daring man captured, a horrible death awaited him, for the Apaches were full of vengeful fury, that he had stolen their priestess—the thought that she had gone willingly never having occurred to them.

Near the fire two horses browsed upon the scanty tufts of herbage found here and there.

Thus far they had done nobly. The black steed was one taken from the Indian village, while his comrade was Tucson Tom's faith-

ful Yellowskin, an animal that he would not have sold for his weight in gold.

The fugitives had just finished a meal, and Tucson Tom had drawn forth his pipe for a smoke, after he had made all secure, when he suddenly raised his head, and listened.

His companion watched him with an interest that was plainly marked on her beautiful face.

There was a mystery in the association of these two—a mystery which in the course of time will gradually be unveiled to the reader. That love had something to do with it might be conjectured from the glances that frequently passed between them.

Tucson Tom remained in this posture for perhaps half a minute, then, uttering an exclamation he placed his ear to the ground.

Apparently this satisfied him, for he soon sprung to his feet and with one quick movement extinguished the small remnant of the fire that had cooked their meal.

Darkness succeeded.

A groping hand caught that of Tucson Tom.

"Have they come so soon, Tom?" breathed a voice in his ear.

"They are here, Dancing Feather. Hush! Remain quiet on this spot until I return."

"Where do you go?"

"Down the *barranca* to learn the truth."

"Then look for me by the horses."

Another instant and he was gone.

He glided down the rocky bed of the old watercourse. The keenest ears could not have detected his passage so silently did he move.

It was not long before he learned the truth and this was enough to cause a thrill of alarm in the breast of the most courageous.

Dark forms were making their way up the bed of the *barranca*.

At intervals there exchanged signals with others on the plain above, and on either side of the gulch.

A rustling almost directly above his head drew the attention of the crouching ranger, and looking up he saw the figure of an Indian warrior outlined against the gray canopy overhead.

Only for a few seconds was the silhouette visible, and then it gave place to a second and a third, all moving up the *barranca*.

Tucson Tom had seen and heard enough. The Apache had, with wonderful ingenuity, discovered their retreat, and were now closing in upon the little camp.

Turning, he began his retreat.

Before he had gone half a dozen yards he came in collision with a human form and a guttural grunt announced the surprise of the Indian whose hand had in the encounter touched his bearded face.

Like a flash Tucson's hand clutched the dusky throat, and the warrior was borne over upon his back.

Fortune favored the Texan.

The slight noise occasioned by the fall was deadened by the howl of a wolf that had retreated up the *barranca* before the advance of the Indians, and was now announcing his displeasure at being caught between two parties of foes.

Tom's clutch was the grip of death. It stifled the red-skin for the moment and then one of the keen blades drawn from the belt did its terrible work.

CHAPTER II.

TRAPPED IN THE FOOT-HILLS.

THE Apache lay motionless. No alarm had been given, although other braves must have been very near.

A moment more of listening and Tom glided away up the *barranca*.

The Indian signals still sounded above and behind him, and he knew full well that not a moment was to be lost.

He reached the place where the little camp-fire had been, but it was now deserted.

Dancing Feather had carried out her word and was with the horses.

A low tremulous call told him where to find her, and in a moment he had reached the side of the fugitive priestess.

He found that she had not been idle. Her life among the Indians had taught her many things that were likely to prove useful on the trail.

While Tucson Tom was scouting down the *barranca* she had secured the muzzles of the two horses in such a way that they could

not betray the presence of the fugitives by an untimely whinny or snort, either of which might prove fatal to their hopes which the ranger noted with satisfaction, though he did not stop to express it.

Mounted on Yellowskin he led the way up the gully, holding the rope-bridle of the other horse.

On each side of them arose the weird walls in most places inaccessible, and which shut them in like the sides of a tomb.

The prospect ahead was not very inviting, but they knew what lay behind, and this emboldened them to push onward.

Now and then the black horse stumbled, and it was an open question as to whether the sounds thus caused might not prove as equally disastrous as a shrill neigh.

The ears of the Apaches were keen, and they would be on the alert for such testimony as to the presence in the bed of the old torrent of those they sought; but, as fast as prudence would allow, Tucson Tom urged the horse on.

The *barranca* trended toward the rocky elevations along the foot of the mountain spur, known as the foot-hills.

These singular formations seemed to stand as sentries for the grim masses piled back of them and whose tips almost pierce the clouds.

Once the deep gully had been the bed of a stream, but its course had been changed, and the torrent only rushed through the old bed upon an occasion of heavy rains.

As they advanced the fugitives found the route more and more difficult.

In vain Tom looked for a means to leave the gulch; it seemed as though the walls were much higher and more precipitous than before.

He began to dimly comprehend that they had entered a trap.

Still, only the one course presented itself—they must move forward.

From their rear there now came sounds that proclaimed a new order of things.

The Texan listened quietly and then said:

"They no longer seek, but pursue us. They have found the ashes of our camp fire, and know we are in the *barranca*."

All seemed lost, and yet there was no sign of discouragement in his tone.

He was a man to whom fear and hopelessness were unknown quantities. In the pursuit of an object death had no terrors for him, and although his name was associated with many thrilling scenes in the past, there lived not the man who could say he had ever known Tucson Tom to take one step out of his way in order to avoid danger.

To his mind the inevitable result of their ascent of the *barranca* was growing more manifest with each passing minute.

The end was near at hand, for it was with difficulty that the horses could advance at all, and presently they would reach the limit of their progress.

Tom's mind was already made up in such an event—they must desert their steeds!

The expected contingency was not long in coming, for Yellowskin suddenly drew up, and for the first time refused to advance. A wall of stone five or six feet in height barred further progress!

"We must dismount here," said Tom, and suiting the action to the word, he leaped down.

The agile girl was beside him instantly.

"Shall we wait here for them?" she asked, as her hand fell upon a revolver in her belt, the present of the man beside her.

"No, we must go on."

"And desert the horses?"

"I am sorry to do so, but there is no other way. We are in a trap."

Tucson Tom patted his horse for the last time. No one could tell what a pang it cost him to forsake that prized and faithful animal.

Had he been alone his only move upon finding himself thus cornered would have been to turn his horse's head down the gulch and have run the gantlet of the Apaches below; but now he had another to think of, and for the sake of the fair one at his side he banished such reckless thoughts, and parted from the horse so dear to him.

Yellowskin could be found again. He would never rest while his horse was in the possession of the Indians.

The wall of rock must have formed a lovely cascade when the gulch was the bed of a stream. It was worn so smooth in most places that the two fugitives had some difficulty in ascending it, but this was finally accomplished and the flight resumed, only soon to discover that a new danger presented itself, and one that threatened them with disaster.

The Indians above had been able to make better speed than those in the rocky gulch, who found all manner of obstacles in their way, besides a much greater degree of darkness on account of the canyon walls.

Ordinarily, a *barranca* cutting across the plain is simply a rocky rift which in many places can be crossed by a horse. Sometimes, in order to get over, it is necessary after entering the gully to follow it up some little distance, in order to find an outlet on the other side. The hoofs of buffalo and antelope, besides the wild mustangs, have beaten a path at such points which one could not mistake.

At the point where this *barranca* came in contact with the foot-hills and the rugged mountain spur, it was entirely different. An expert climber could hardly have scaled the cliff-like walls, so smooth were they.

More than once within the last few minutes, while they toiled on over the rough way, Tucson Tom had been made acquainted with the fact that their enemies were above them.

He saw the outline of a savage head for a few seconds, as the Apache clung to a rock far above and tried to pierce the black depths below with his keen orbs, some slight sound having probably reached his ear.

A little further on and the ranger knew an enemy was also on the other side of the gulch, for a small pebble falling from above gave him a smart rap on the shoulder.

Behind them all was silence. Even the signals that, up to this time, had served to tell them the distance of their foes, had now utterly ceased.

Tucson Tom knew full well that the human wolves were all the more to be feared on that account. So long as they gave tongue he could locate them, but when this ceased, there began to be felt an uncertainty as to their positions and an uneasiness regarding the chances of their being close at hand.

Bravely the fugitives pushed on.

They were now ascending the foot-hills.

Still no means of leaving the gulch came before their eyes.

What if the Indians above, hurrying on, should discover such an opening first, and descend into the *barranca*?

This would place the fugitives between two fires, and render their doom certain; yet it was a possibility they had to look in the face, and which might yet confront them.

Tucson Tom's advance was suddenly stayed, and his companion heard him utter a word of impatience.

"What is it now, Tom?" she whispered.

He pointed in front.

"Look there. A wall of rock bars our progress, and it cannot be scaled. Here we are brought to bay, and the red hounds are closing in!"

CHAPTER III.

TUCSON TOM AT BAY.

THERE remained a single hope.

It flashed into the mind of the Texan even as he drew a revolver and prepared to face the creeping foe.

"Stay here! I will be back presently!" and with these words he glided away.

Tom moved to the side of the gulch.

As he reached it, he hastily set to work making an examination of its character.

While thus engaged, he heard certain sounds below which told him something.

The Apaches, creeping up the *barranca*, had come to the deserted horses.

This discovery would tell them that those they sought were not far away, and would cause them to continue their advance with renewed vigor.

Although this fact could but have a depressing effect upon the ranger, still he did not allow it to hinder his work, and in a brief space of time he had made a discovery that gave him new hope.

Back to the fair girl he made his way, and

taking her hand he led her to the spot where the surface of the wall seemed seared by a slanting line.

It was a narrow path.

Tucson Tom led the way up it, and slowly the two mounted.

Half-way to the top of the wall the oblique ledge came to an end.

Here they were some twenty feet from the bottom of the *barranca*, and half that distance from the line which, traced sharply against the gray sky, marked the top of the wall.

A further danger now threatened them.

Should the Indians come below they would discover the fugitives in the same manner in which they themselves had discovered the Indian scouts when they crouched upon the rocks above.

To avoid this they must press against the wall.

The girl seemed to understand this.

Tucson Tom had passed to the very end of the little ledge to give her the best place. He was listening for some sign of the enemy below when he felt his brave companion tug at his sleeve.

"I am listening, Dancing Feather!" he said.

"I believe I have found a cave," she replied.

He could not repress a start as a sudden thought came into his mind:

"What makes you think so?"

"There is an opening here. I will go in and explore it."

"Not so!" he said hastily; "remain where you are and I will go."

He found the small opening, more of a cleft apparently than aught else, and passing in, spent a minute or so in feeling around before he helped her through the aperture.

"Why would you keep me back?" she asked as she stood at his side.

"I feared that might be a panther, or worse still, a grizzly in here."

"Do you think it the lair of a wild beast then?"

"I thought it might prove to be such then, and now that's no doubt in my mind!"

"What have you found, Senor Tom?"

"With my foot I moved a number of bones. However, the beast is prowling along the foot-hills, and that ain't much danger of a return so long as the reds hold the pass."

"Can we escape?"

"I don't know, Mabel. The chances were good before we lost our horses, but I reckon we stand a poor show now. That's one good thing about it. They believe I carried you off, and they won't hurt you!"

"What happens to you must come to me. If you live, I live, but if they kill you, I must die. After what you have told me I could not go back again to that life. Do not mistake, Tom. In taking chances for yourself you are taking them for me."

"Brave girl!" he murmured. "Heaven grant we may live to reach Tucson!"

No more was said. A pressure of the hand that meant volumes, and then the ranger moved toward the opening to discover what he could of their foes.

Silence reigned without.

It would not remain long, for the Apaches must soon learn that their expected game was no longer in the *barranca*.

Surveying the top of the opposite wall, the Texan ranger made two discoveries.

First of all the moon was rising.

Her silvery disk, almost perfect, was peeping into view above the plain, and broadly outlined against the bright background was the figure of an Apache brave, the night breeze blowing his long black hair as he stood on the opposite bank, leaning on his lance and apparently on guard.

The moon had hardly come into view before she met the black advance of cloud legions sweeping up from the West.

These greedily ingulfed the bright queen of night, and she was seen no more.

Since her rising, however, the intense darkness had flown, and things which had previously been wrapped in impenetrable gloom were now readily discerned.

Soon signals and low voices from below told that the Indians had arrived.

Evidently their astonishment was great, especially when they discovered that the rocky barrier in the gulch, over which the

torrent had been wont to leap like a young Niagara, could not be scaled by the most agile among them.

One thing alone must ensue: they would begin a search, and the chances were in favor of finding the oblique ledge that ran up the face of the wall.

What then? Tucson Tom shut his teeth hard, and with a grim smile drew back the hammer of the weapon he held in his hand. With revolver and bowie he believed he could hold his own against the foe.

In the presence of the young girl he had much to inspire him, yet possibly the time might soon come when he would wish she were in safer quarters, for these devils who were so soon to be pitted against him in all their courage and cunning, would show exceeding ingenuity in their endeavors to get hold of him when once his hiding-place was made known to them.

The voices below had now ceased.

He knew this meant that the copper-colored fiends were searching the place.

How slowly the minutes went by.

Tucson Tom never moved, but lying there with his eyes fastened upon the opening, he held his revolver in a firm grip, waiting for what he knew would eventually come.

There was no outcry to tell him when the Indians had found the ledge, which he believed must be a natural sequence to their hunt.

How desperate the situation had become he could not help but realize, for, once cooped up in this cave, and surrounded by the savages who sought his blood, what chance was there for escape?

Even if fortune should be so kind as to show them a way out of the cave, on foot, in this hostile land their case would appear hopeless.

There are times when in desperation one does not have any desire to look ahead. The present is sufficient to concentrate all our thoughts, and we continue to shade our eyes hoping that something may soon turn up to bring a new phase upon the matter.

Tucson Tom presently became aware that his enemies had found the secret ledge.

How he knew this it would be hard to say, since no shout announced the discovery. He seemed to have an intuition that there was a hostile presence near him. He could almost feel its gradual approach.

Was it fancy or did he actually catch the suppressed breathing of some daring climber outside the cleft?

Crouching there he strained his ears to the utmost, and quickly made up his mind that there was some one close by who was slowly and cautiously advancing, foot by foot, along the narrow platform that ran upward from the bottom of the *barranca*.

A few more brief seconds and the struggle must begin that appeared to have but one end—the death of the daring ranger who had ventured alone into the dangerous country of the Apache in order to rescue their priestess, between whom and himself some mysterious affinity existed.

Ah! the critical moment had arrived.

There was a movement beyond the mouth of the orifice, and then a moving object caught the attention of the statue-like ranger.

Outlined against the sky with its curtain of clouds screening the moon, was the figure of a stalwart Indian warrior, who knelt upon the platform at the entrance to the cave, and seemed to be endeavoring to pierce the gloom of its interior with his basilisk eyes.

Tucson Tom was face to face with his first victim.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CAVE FORT.

HAD it been possible for the Apache brave to have pierced the darkness he would not have remained so stationary upon the ledge, for his danger would then have become known.

Tucson Tom had advanced his revolver until the muzzle was within a yard of the naked breast of the giant Indian.

The Apache, straining his eyes in the endeavor to see into that black cleft saw a vivid flash, and that was all.

His body fell over the edge of the little shelf, and went to the bottom of the gulch where it struck heavily.

The first tragedy was over; the second was at hand, for the space occupied by the war-

rior who had gone to his death was vacant only a moment, but this brave who gained the fatal spot knew what he had to expect and acted accordingly for he had no sooner gained a position where he could see the yawning mouth of the crevice than he made an agile leap, much after the style of a bull-frog, seeing that he was in a squatting posture at the time.

Fatal leap! The brave red-skin literally impaled himself upon the bowie extended in Tom's left hand.

An awful screech told the dusky braves without that the second attempt to secure their foe had been as dismal a failure as the first.

The body of the second Apache lay across the opening of the cave.

Leaning out over it Tucson Tom thrust forth his arm and fired several shots down the inclined plane.

Some little commotion ensued, for there were other Indians on the slanting ledge, and when the fusillade came there was a hasty flight; then silence succeeded.

What would the infuriated savages attempt next?

Crouching there he awaited their action, and he did not have long to wait either.

A pebble dropping upon the shelf gave him warning what to expect.

The Indians had changed their tactics. This time the assault, instead of coming from below was to be from above.

Those who were upon the wall of the *barranca* wished to have a part in the game, believing that perhaps they could do better than their brethren below—at which Tucson Tom chuckled to himself.

Such a trick as this was not apt to take him by surprise, even had he not been warned in time by the falling pebble.

Soon a moving object caught his eye.

It was the dangling foot of the man who was being let down by his comrades.

Why did he remain in mid-air?

Perhaps he was waiting for some signal from below, which would indicate the readiness for work of those in that quarter.

Thus Tom became convinced that an attack was intended from two sides at once, but bided his time.

At length there was a guttural exclamation from without, followed by a clamor of wild yells from those upon the top of the walls and those in the depths of the gulch.

The object of these weird cries could not be mistaken by one who had fought the wild Apaches as often as Tucson Tom.

They hoped by such an outcry not only to drown the slight noise made by their comrades in forcing the assault, but at the same time to so confuse the daring pale-face that his arm, which had already dealt death to two of their number, might be partially paralyzed and forget its cunning.

When that wild yell burst upon the night air, the dangling figure of the Indian above the crevice suddenly flashed into view.

He had dropped upon the ledge; but, Tucson Tom paid no attention to this fellow, for another daring brave, who had crept up the slanting ledge, had sprung around the corner of the crevice, repeating the tactics of the fellow who had impaled himself upon the ranger's bowie.

The ready revolver cracked, and the determined Apache sunk down in a heap; then a second shot sent the savage on the ledge howling down the steep acclivity.

Tucson Tom had reason to feel satisfied with his work thus far.

He had disabled four of his enemies.

Would others follow?

The Apaches were not fools. They would not persist in a course that must always place them under a disadvantage, but would soon turn to something new.

He could only wait, on the alert, undaunted.

In any event, he thought, his fair companion would not be harmed. She at least would be spared injury or suffering for what he had done. That was a comforting thought.

The ranger was thinking of this and feeling satisfied that Dancing Feather was out of the range of the missiles, when he suddenly made a discovery that gave him quite a shock.

A minute before there had been two dusky

bodies forming a breastwork in front of him.

Now there was but one!

CHAPTER V.

A BATTLE IN THE DARK.

THE light sifted in through the opening of the crevice, and although the cave-fort was dark to any one without, he could plainly see the stark form of the dead Indian stretched before him.

Where was the other brave, who had been twice shot?

A thought flashed through the mind of Tucson Tom just then.

The warrior, knowing what was coming had dropped just as he fired.

Inch by inch he had worked his way along until he was able to rise up.

Where was he now?

The question had hardly framed itself in his mind before it was answered. A pair of brawny arms suddenly clasped themselves around his body.

Like a flash Tucson Tom whirled about and then began a terrible struggle.

Had it been a white man thus pitted against him, the very first thing would have been to yell lustily.

This the Indian apparently scorned to do. He would conquer alone or die.

The deadly struggle went on in silence each man exerting all his powers.

Slowly the ranger twisted himself around in the other's grasp.

It was as though he had been embraced by steel rods, and yet by degrees he was overcoming this severe tension.

At last by a movement something like the "bucking" of a broncho, he managed to throw the fellow sideways, and before the astonished Indian could fully comprehend how it had been done, Tucson Tom was at his throat.

The savage stoicism now gave way, but when the warrior would have called for help the cry was stifled in his throat, for the fierce clutch of the ranger was upon his gullet, then the bowie did its deadly work.

The voice of the young girl now reached his ears from the interior of the cave.

She had heard the fierce struggle, and the dread silence that followed had filled her with grave apprehensions.

"Senor Tom, are you safe?"

He did not expect any further assault, for a time at least, and believed it safe to move back and reassure her.

"Not a scratch to speak of, Mabel. You must keep back here beyond range. I believe they will soon be mad enough to send a storm of bullets into the mouth of the crevice."

"And you?"

"I'll keep close. The bullet ain't molded yet, I reckon, that's going to take the life of Tucson Tom."

"Holy Mother protect you, Senor Tom. I have discovered two things in here."

"Hello! then you haven't been idle, little one. What are they?"

"Listen!"

The ranger did so.

"I hear the trickling of water. That must be a spring in this place," he said.

"Yes, it comes from some place back yonder and disappears down a crevice."

"That is good, Dancing Feather. I will try the water and see how it goes. Now that was something else you spoke of."

"Listen again, and see if you can hear something beyond the murmur of the water."

Once more he bent his ear.

The seconds flew by until finally above the trickling of the tiny stream came a sound that pierced Tom's ear like the shrill notes of a piping fife.

It was only a faint cry, a plaintive note much like that of a new-born babe, yet it was full of alarm for one who knew its nature.

"Thunder! that's tiger-cubs here! Wait till I strike a light, Mabel, and if the old critter's on hand I must give her battle."

The situation was anything but pleasant.

Around them darkness. Outside human foes, eager for the blood of this terrible borderer, and devising means whereby their object could be accomplished.

Close by, and inside the peculiar crevice cave that had afforded them shelter from their

human foes, a batch of cubs, and perhaps their savage mother.

Tucson Tom drew a match from his pocket and handed it to his companion, telling her to ignite it when he gave the word.

He had refilled the empty chambers of his revolver, and holding this in one hand and a bowie in the other, he planted himself in front of the girl.

"Strike!"

The match flamed up, and presented to their eyes a sight that was not strange in its way, but which was rendered peculiarly unpleasant by their situation.

Beyond the little spring, and in a corner of the cave were two small objects that looked with open eyes at the light, and snarled as the ranger advanced toward them.

"Bear cubs, by Jove!" ejaculated Tom.

The consciousness that they were in the den of a grizzly bear did not tend to raise their spirits.

True, the animal was away, yet she might return at any moment, and then woe to those whom the enraged monster should find in near proximity to her cubs.

The thought was not pleasant. Still less so was the suspicion that there might be a back entrance to this strange cave in the cliff, through which the grizzly demon might come upon them unawares.

This brought a new danger face to face, one that would perhaps prove more formidable than that against which they had so bravely been holding out.

Even as he stood there by the side of the fair girl, after quenching his thirst at the little stream, startling sounds were borne aloft from the *barranca*.

Tucson Tom guessed the truth at once.

Above the excited cries of the Indians and the sharp echoing reports of firearms, he could hear a terrible roaring such as only an infuriated monster could give vent to.

"The grizzly is coming!" he cried, hoarsely.

CHAPTER VI.

A GRIZZLY CHARGE.

No sooner had he uttered the words than he bounded toward the mouth of the cave.

Reaching this point he paused to listen.

The racket still continued below. There were the shouts, the shots, and that awful roaring sound such as might precede an avalanche.

As near as he could judge the sounds came from a point close to where the path along the face of the rocky cliff began.

Should the grizzly escape the bullets and knives of the Apaches, she would soon be at the opening.

Tom bent over the dead Indians.

The two bodies formed quite a barricade before him, but it was not upon this he meant to depend.

Both of them had powder-horns slung over their shoulders, though the guns had been left with their fellows when they set about the perilous undertaking that had cost their lives.

One of these powder-horns was of unusual size and full to the top.

Removing the stopper, Tom placed this upon the ledge in such a way that the contents oozed out to a small degree.

Then with the other he hastily laid a train into the cave.

He also hauled one of the Indians to a certain point, knowing that the huge brute would be at once attracted to him by her strong scent of human blood.

This was not done any too quickly.

The grizzly had undoubtedly run the gantlet of Apache guns and lances in the *barranca*, and was already on the way up the ledge.

If there chanced to be any Indians on the inclined plane, they would probably lose no time in getting off before the bear in her furious rush reached them.

The cries of the Indians had now changed to those of wonder and even satisfaction, as they began to comprehend that the monster that had charged among them with such resistless impetuosity, instead of being an enemy, really was an ally.

Where they had failed she might succeed!

The fugitives were in her den, and it was to be expected from her manner that Bruin would make short work of them.

Thus it was that the Apaches from attempting to take the life of the grizzly were now watching her ascent of the cliff with no little solicitude.

One thing displeased them

Far up the ledge, almost at its junction with the hole in the wall, one of the Apaches had been crouching, evidently enjoying the commotion among his fellows below while he was in such a secure hight.

This humor changed when he realized the truth by seeing those of his comrades who were further down, leap into the gulch.

There was no opportunity for him.

He found himself between three fires.

If he jumped he would probably break his neck, if he remained, an encounter with a grizzly on that narrow shelf could have but one outcome, while to attempt to enter the cave was to court his death.

Those below called out to him to jump.

Others above tried to attract his attention with the still dangling lasso which had served the ill-fated warrior, whose remains now lay in the *barranca*.

It was of no avail; the grizzly was upon him.

Manfully the brave braced himself for the conflict, and when the animal came within reach of his arm struck bravely out.

There were a few seconds of confused noises.

Then rung out a despairing cry as the opposing Apache was hurled out into space.

The next moment the grizzly appeared before the vision of the crouching ranger.

As he had expected, the monster moved at once toward the body of the Indian that Tom had placed in position—just what he desired, for, as the huge brute bent its small head over the blood-stained body, to learn if it still possessed life, there was a bright flash and a peculiar puffing sound as the fire ran along the rock with a spurt.

No sooner had Tucson Tom applied the match to his train than he threw himself down behind the body in the passage, and clutching his revolver awaited events.

The time was brief enough, for the grizzly, with a snort of alarm as the fiery serpent glided toward her, would back, but a few inches brought her to the verge of the rocky shelf. Then came a stunning report as the powder-horn exploded.

Tom raised himself to discover the beast gone—blown over cliff and probably killed by the explosion.

Tucson Tom breathed easier.

Brave man though he was, reckless as he had often proved himself, he was not at all eager to meet an enraged she-grizzly face to face in her den.

But the Indian yet remained; so he was on the alert again.

Soon he heard the voices of the astonished Apaches below, who seemed to realize that they had opposed to them an agent of the Evil Spirit rather than a human being.

Tucson Tom, anticipating the next move, made his way back to the angle, around which he found the girl.

Here he could keep an eye on the mouth of the den, and at the same time be in a place of security from a rifle fusilade.

Hardly had he settled himself in this new spot when a gun was discharged and the ball glancing from the rocky floor struck the wall.

"I thought so," muttered the ranger grimly.

His words were drowned by the crash of guns outside, and once more the *barranca* echoed with the roar as of battle.

CHAPTER VII.

APACHE TACTICS.

THE bullets flew about in a lively manner, but the volley ceased about as suddenly as it had begun, and silence ensued—somewhat prolonged silence.

This silence did not arouse any false hopes in his mind; that they were plotting mischief of some sort, he knew.

It was not long before he became aware of the nature of the next trial.

Several warriors had strung themselves out in a line on the slanting ledge, and began passing up wood, after the manner of water-buckets sent from hand to hand at a fire in the olden days.

The wood was thrown close to the mouth of the orifice of the den.

Slowly it accumulated, but the ranger knew better than to make any attempt to dislodge it. More than one gun was bearing upon the opening, so he could but omit their proceedings and attempt to smoke him out.

When the Apaches concluded that enough wood, green and dry, had been thrown into the place to answer their purpose, they ceased operations, and, a moment later, Tucson Tom saw a light without—the sudden glare of a torch, in the hand of a red-skin.

This hand was quickly advanced toward the pile of brushwood on the rock.

To apply the torch the Indian had to expose the upper portion of his body. Then a flash from within and sharply the revolver of the ranger rung out upon the night air.

The Apache sprung into view, seemed about to fall, recovered himself, and bending, applied the torch.

Tucson Tom did not fire again.

Even in an enemy he could admire such bravery, and he saw the torch applied with something of awe.

As the Apache dropped the blazing torch among the dry fagots he raised himself erect, gave a loud cry of defiance, and falling back, vanished from view over the ledge.

The flames caught readily upon the dry wood and presently the smoke came in through the opening.

It grew heavier as the minutes passed on, while shots sounded from without.

The Indians were fearful lest some attempt should be made to extinguish the fire, and to render such an effort a risky one they had opened up a brisk fire.

Tucson Tom was all anxiety, of course, but, not to his surprise soon observed that the smoke was drawn toward the unexplored interior of the cavern, much as if there was a draught that made the place a funnel or chimney.

This removed all danger from this source.

So long as the smoke found an outlet at some point beyond, they need not fear suffocation.

This draught could have but one meaning.

There was another opening beyond—which important fact being communicated to the men on the top of the wall, they would probably begin a search for this second passage; the oozing smoke would lead them direct to the spot.

Should this be found what would be their next move?

That would depend entirely upon the size of this second entrance.

If it was large enough to admit of the passage of a man, then why not use it to leave their prison?

The idea seemed to Tom feasible, and he had just made up his mind to venture, when his attention was forcibly drawn to another matter.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ROAR OF THE WATER AVALANCHE.

ONCE or twice before, Tucson Tom had believed he heard the rumble of distant thunder.

He had paid little attention to it, for the desperate nature of his own situation would not allow him to think of much else.

Just at the moment, however, of his deciding to investigate the rear of the cavern and learn what manner of opening was there, a peculiar rumbling sound reached his ears.

He could but stand still and listen.

Louder and louder it grew.

The torrid heat of the preceding day and the change in the atmosphere at nightfall had not been surprising in that strange climate, and there had been signs of a sudden storm which Tom had not failed to note; so he inferred that a real Arizona cloud-burst was impending. The deep-toned thunder told its own story, and even while he listened the storm was rushing on with the fury of a cyclone. Indeed, though he knew it not, the wind tore up the very earth and threatened destruction to every living thing in its path.

Tucson Tom and Dancing Feather stood listening to the fury of the elements without.

The ranger heard the rain descending in a solid sheet, such as we in temperate countries never experience, but which is the way the water falls in hotter countries.

Loud though the angry voice of the storm had been up to this time, Tucson Tom's at-

tention was now attracted by his companion to a new noise doubly terrible.

The howling of the wind, and even the reverberating crash of thunder were insignificant beside the awful roar that soon seemed to shake the big mountain-side.

What could it mean?

To the young girl, who had spent most of her life among the Apaches, the answer was apparent.

"A water-cloud has burst on the mountain, Senor Tom!" she cried.

"That is what we hear, and it has struck the *arroyo* above. In two minutes it will be here, and then woe to the Apaches below!"

All fear of a shot from their enemies was now over, and when Tucson Tom found that his companion was accompanying him to the mouth of the crevice, he made no effort to dissuade her.

A few kicks sent the burning and smoking brands over the ledge into the *barranca*.

No shot followed the act.

The Apaches had other things to engage their attention just then.

That rumbling sound which, with the speed of the wind had become a frightful roar, warned them as to what they must expect.

Consternation had seized upon them.

Their cries of alarm rung out even above the fearful roar of the approaching water avalanche.

The lightning played almost constantly, so that the scene was lit up with the faithfulness of daylight.

Tucson Tom and his companion, looking out, saw it all as though it were a scene at a theater upon which they gazed.

Already quite a little stream flowed through the gulch, and the Indians had to dash knee deep in the water as they sought to escape.

It was a miniature pandemonium.

The flash of the electric fluid, the crash of the thunder, the yells of the thoroughly terrified Indians, and the soul-harrowing, earth-quaking approach of the mighty water-wave that rushed down the mountain-side with demoniac fury—all these things combined, formed a situation that could but strike terror to the boldest heart, if exposed to their violence.

Some of the Apaches, rendered frantic by the awful calamity hovering above them, ran down the gulch as fast as their terror and the nature of the rocky bed and impending water would allow.

Their doom was sealed. Before they could get half-way to a place where the walls of the gulch might be scaled, it would be upon them and end all.

Others made a break for the walls, climbing wherever by means of hands and toes they could get a hold upon the rocks.

Several reached the inclined plane, and mounting it, held on grimly, awaiting the shock.

Here and there they clung to the rocky face of the wall, each man with teeth clinched and muscles set for the coming struggle.

At such a time their most hated foe might have come among them unscathed.

In time of flood a man and a panther have been known to float down a stream on the same log, and for the time being the natural fierceness of the animal would be subdued by his alarm.

"Look upward!" said Tom, quickly.

There shot into view between their point of vision and the electric-lighted heavens a fearful volume of water.

It leaped out from the plateau in front of the cave like an arrow from a bow; then came a shock that made the earth tremble under it as the vast volume struck the *barranca* bottom below.

After that one convulsive leap, the mad torrent rushed onward in one solid form or tide fully twenty feet high!

The Indians—where were they?

Tucson Tom cast his eye around.

Then a shudder ran through his frame as he comprehended what a terrible fate had come upon those who had pursued him with such relentless ferocity, and who were his natural foes.

Of those who had been clinging to the opposite wall, at various points, according to the agility they had been able to display in ascending it, but one remained in sight.

He had been further down the gulch than his companions and although deluged by the

giant water wave, it had not descended upon him from above, as had been the case with the unfortunates who had been closer to the wall of rock over which the wave had swept.

Still, this warrior would doubtless have been swept away in the boiling torrent but for his cunning.

He had not had enough confidence in his own strength, but had taken advantage of the minute's respite, after reaching his position, to wrap his lasso around himself and the spur of rock to which he clung.

Although violently wrenched and half drowned, he now lived to thank his lucky stars for such a happy thought or inspiration.

Tom was horrified at the general destruction.

Like the snap of one's finger his pursuers had been blotted out of existence.

A bolt of lightning or an exploding torpedo could hardly have done the work quicker.

Even the men who had been upon the slanting edge had gone with the rest, for they had had no means of holding on.

This would materially reduce the number of his foes, as it was hardly probable there could be more than half a dozen on the plateau above.

He took courage for the future.

CHAPTER IX.

A RED RIDER ON THE BUCKSKIN HORSE.

TURNING away from the fearful spectacle Tucson Tom picked up a brand that was still smoldering, and by a few rapid whirled around his head fanned it into a bright flame.

If this passage was of such dimensions that they could pass through it when the storm had expended its violence, he meant that they should make the attempt.

The bear cubs were now crying lustily, for the terrible noises had alarmed them.

As he passed by Tucson knocked them on the head in mercy to save them from starvation.

Beyond the point where the bear cubs lay the passage got smaller.

They found no difficulty as yet in their advance, though they soon began to marvel at the length of the passage.

Eventually it led them to an opening among the rocks, where it might have been unseen by even one who made a close survey.

This opening was large enough to admit of their leaving the cliff cave, but it would never have answered as a means of egress or ingress for the old grizzly.

In the mean time the storm had died out. The rain had ceased, and the thunder was rumbling in the distance. A sullen roar told of the torrent that was still sweeping down the gulch.

The stars were already peeping through great gaps in the storm-clouds that skurried on in the endeavor to catch up with their companions in the battle line in front.

Soon the moon burst forth.

There was now no reason why the fugitives should not leave the spot and seek a new shelter while their enemies were so terribly broken up and disorganized under the shock of the catastrophe.

Tucson Tom led the way.

They had no desire to seek the plains while everything was deluged in this manner for it would be safer to hide for the present in the mountains, seeing that they were on foot.

Several times the ranger had thought of his faithful steed. Had Yellowskin been swept away by the angry torrent, or had the Indians below been able to get out of the *barranca* and save the two horses that had fallen into their hands.

There was a good chance that this latter view of the case might be so.

Already the ranger was revolving plan after plan in his brain. He knew full well that it was folly to think of escaping from Apache-land on foot. Scores of weary miles lay before them and the civilization toward which they aimed, and even when mounted, the task of eluding the bands of savages, scouring the plains in search of the daring pale-face who had invaded their country and carried off their priestess, would be difficult enough.

As they ascended the elevation Tucson Tom kept his eyes about him.

In the end he discovered what he sought, which was a shelter among some rocks.

Their peculiar formation in falling from a high above had produced a rude cave, and riotous vines growing about could be so deftly arranged as to further hide the place.

It was an eyrie.

When daylight came they would be able to see the broad plain spread out before them, and could watch the movements of their enemies, for he felt sure there would be a gathering in this vicinity since it had been learned that those of whom they had been in search were in the neighborhood.

The long ride of the preceding day, and the startling events of the night, following so quickly upon one another, had done much toward making the ranger weary.

He believed they were now in a place that was at least secure for the time being.

While his companion slept, Tom managed to doze between times.

Every hour he was awake and on the lookout at the opening in front.

About two hours from dawn he had his attention attracted by a light on the side of the mountain, a mile or so away from the eyrie where Dancing Feather slept and he kept guard.

By scouting he was enabled to make out three fires in a row.

It was evidently a signal from those of the ill-fated band who had been fortunate enough to escape the doom of their comrades, and was intended to notify those of their comrades who might be miles away, and yet within sight of the signal fires, that their presence was desired in that vicinity as soon as possible.

Tom saw that the fires were steadily maintained, but he did not deem it worth his while to take a scout in that direction.

Morning came at length.

The sun's rays soon dried the wet ground and by noon all evidence of the late storm had vanished, save where trees had been uprooted by the violence of the wind.

Tucson Tom was early surveying the scene, and soon located the Indian camp.

It was at the base of the foot-hills, half a mile away from the deadly *barranca*.

Surveying the plain Tucson Tom saw no evidence of any Apache band being near, but they had hardly finished their meager breakfast of jerked venison washed down by a drink from a water pocket close by, than the eyes of the young girl caught a glimpse of a moving body far out upon the plain.

It came from the direction of the hazy-blue mountains that marked the home of the Apaches.

Watching carefully, the ranger ere long made this moving object out to be a band of riders.

An hour later they were close enough for him to count them, and he made out seven Apache braves, whose lance-tips flashed in the sun's rays.

They had seen the signal.

A single horseman dashed out from the camp to meet them, at which Tom uttered an exclamation of joy.

Surely his eyes did not deceive him! The buckskin-colored horse that bore the Apache courier along with such clean leaps could be no other than his beloved Yellowskin!

"I'll have him yet," he muttered.

The lone rider and the little cavalcade came nearer together and finally met.

For a little time they halted; then the onward progress was resumed.

What did this mean?

They no longer headed toward the little camp at the foot of the mountain, but making a sharp turn to the right, aiming for the *barranca*, that, at this point, seemed a dark line upon the green face of the plain.

Tucson Tom glues his eyes upon the little band of seven.

As yet he is puzzled by this maneuver.

They reach the *barranca*.

He sees them one by one urge their horses down the slanting buffalo-path until all have vanished—mustangs and red riders.

The minutes glide by until ten have passed.

Then there suddenly rises over the dead level of the plain on the other side, and further down the *barranca*, the figure of an Indian, mounted on a piebald mustang.

He is not alone. A second follows close behind, and then another, until seven are in view, riding toward the spur of the foot-hills.

At the base of these they dismount, and soon the smoke of a fire tells that a second camp has been formed.

The plan of the Apaches is to pitch a line of camps along the base of the mountains, and prevent the escape of those whom they know are hiding above!

CHAPTER X.

THE HORSE-GUARD.

THIS seems to throw a new light upon the whole business.

To go over the mountain now is utterly out of the question, and yet to remain where they are brings grave trouble upon the two.

By morning the Apaches, strengthened by new forces which must continually arrive, will be ready to make their still-hunt, and for the whites to be found here means death.

Such is far from the intention of Tucson Tom.

The sight of the buckskin horse started an idea in his mind which he is bound to at least attempt.

Darkness descends upon mountain and valley, and both the prairie below and the *barranca* that runs through it like a road cut deep below the surface, disappear from view.

Tucson Tom looks about him.

A grim smile of satisfaction steals over his face as he notes the gloom, for it certainly favors his purpose.

He has noted a number of things in connection with the Indian camp—things that will be of value later on.

Just now there is no need of any haste; hence he and Dancing Feather lie down to sleep.

There is no need of wakefulness, as the bowie bravo well knows.

Once upon their expedition, the chances are decidedly against their obtaining sleep again that night, so they determine to secure what rest is possible in the earlier hours.

A silence as of death broods over the little camp of the pale-face fugitives.

The mournful howl of the wolf was heard along the mountain-side, and other sounds of the night broke out at intervals, but here all was deathly quiet.

Slowly the hours passed.

Finally Tucson Tom arose from his couch of leaves, and cast his eyes aloft.

The position of the stars told him that it was after midnight.

There was now no need of further delay—the time for action had come.

As he turned, after making these sweeping observations, he found the young girl beside him. Dancing Feather had heard him move and was on her feet immediately.

"It is time," he said, briefly.

"I am ready, Tom," she replied.

His plan was already known to her, for he desired that she should be aware of all the risk they ran.

Much depended upon her action, and he knew that her Indian training would prove valuable now.

They commenced to descend the foot-hills.

This was no easy task even under the most favorable circumstances, and when the mantle of darkness hid the face of the mountains, it made the matter doubly difficult.

Their progress was naturally slow, but sure. Step by step they neared the foot of the range, and each passing minute brought them nearer the camp of their foes.

They neither saw nor heard anything that would go to prove the presence of enemies, and yet, it was a fact that at least a score of cunning red-skins were posted along the base of the hills on guard.

Once Tucson Tom gave a start.

From out on the prairie, now wrapped in impenetrable gloom, there came the neigh of a steed.

He knew it well!

Could faithful Buckskin have scented his presence? The thought was a pleasant one, and his eye kindled as he continued his downward progress.

The base of the hills was reached.

Here the long prairie grass, baked in places by the hot sun, and waving green along the sides of the *barranca*, served them as a means of continuing their advance.

Every few yards of the advance was marked by a temporary halt.

Tucson Tom would then raise his head above the surrounding herbage, and take a survey of the situation; then, satisfied that all was well, he would once more bow close to the earth and again advance.

They were now nearing the spot where he had seen the first camp of the Indians. At any moment it might be expected that they would run upon a vedette.

Tucson Tom knew how to put such a barrier out of their path.

A patch of timber now loomed up.

This had to be passed, for the horses were secured on the other side.

It was not an easy task, for the keen eyes of Apache sentries were watching, and their ears were on the alert for any unusual sound that should disturb the silence of the night. Foot by foot they advanced.

Tucson Tom felt a thrill of pride at the nerve shown by the young girl. She could not have won his admiration so thoroughly in any other manner.

Looking to the south, Tom saw the dark figure of an Indian outlined against the low horizon line.

The Apache was not more than twenty feet away, and yet so silently did the two crawl through the grass, that he appeared to have no suspicion of their presence.

Other dangers there were, but they avoided them all, and finally gained the rear of the timber.

By this they knew they must be close to the horses, and the quick ear of the ranger was on the alert for some sign of their presence.

It came at last.

The unmistakable sound of some still hungry steed, cropping the shorter, sweeter grass that grew close to the ground, was heard.

With this to guide them, they could not go astray, and still their extremest caution was not relaxed.

The Apaches' horses had been staked out as was customary.

Tucson Tom soon came upon them.

They were watched by the guard.

This guard, of course, must be disposed of before the desired end could be achieved.

The ranger moved toward him.

He had the advantage of seeing his enemy, without himself being seen, and could thus watch every movement as he advanced.

It was worth something to see the wonderful advance made by that man with the iron nerve, as he drew himself inch by inch over the intervening ground, his eyes glued upon the figure of his intended victim.

Between his teeth the ranger held one of his bowies.

Once he found an opportunity to make use of this, all hope for the Apache was over.

Nearer and nearer he crept.

The brave had his lance thrust into the ground and seemed to be leaning up against it.

Tom could not even be sure that he was not asleep, for he now saw that the man's head seemed to be inclined forward.

This would make his task so much the easier, and for this he was thankful.

Once a little twig, blown hither by the recent wind from the motte of trees near by, snapped under his weight.

The sound was slight, but quite enough to reach keen ears on the alert, so that Tom looked to see some sign that would tell him the guard suspected the presence of danger.

Nothing of the kind occurred, and soon the Texan rose up behind the horse-guard like a specter of the night.

The horses were near by, and Tom even caught a low whinny, which he knew full well as he reached out his left hand to close it upon the red-skin's throat.

Nothing could apparently save the doomed horse-guard, for, as the fingers of the ranger fastened upon his dusky neck, the bowie was drawn for the fatal stroke; but it was not given!

CHAPTER XI.

INTO THE GOPHER TRAP.

THE ranger had made an astounding discovery that, for the moment, palsied his arm.

He had stretched out his hand to grasp a

living man, but like a flash came the fearful knowledge that he had clutched the throat of a corpse!

No wonder he had stayed his stroke.

What devilry was this?

The dead brave was *lashed* to the upright lance, and in this way kept in a standing position.

Tom realized that it was not done without a motive, and what the probable nature of this motive must be he could easily guess.

The horse-guard had believed that if the bold white man who had defied them thus far made any descent from his camp on the foot-hills, he would certainly aim for the spot where the horses were staked, as it would be impossible for him to get away on foot.

Believing thus, he had prepared a dummy and made use of one of his comrades who had been drowned in the *arroyo*.

Doubtless the cunning savage crouched near at hand, watching and waiting.

This flashed through the mind of the ranger. In truth, he seemed to have hardly clutched the Indian by the throat than he realized his grasp and turned about.

A rustling of the grass warned him that he was in danger.

Even as he whirled around a dusky figure sprung upon him, but before the confident guard could realize that he had made a fearful blunder, he was in the clutch of the pale-face's terrible left hand.

Then there was a sudden upheaval, and the two men went down beside the phantom sentry—

Tom on top.

The tragedy was short: the brave was soon in the throes of death—a perfectly silent death.

Tom arose, and immediately by low signal called Dancing Feather to his side.

There is nothing like common danger, shared in company, to draw souls together, and these two, however much they may have thought of each other in the past, now grew dearer because of the perils surrounding them.

Mabel shuddered when she saw the dead horse-guard, and then looked with pride upon her companion, as she anxiously scanned him. Had he been hurt in the encounter?

Being assured that her hero had not received a scratch, she quietly followed him among the horses.

Tucson Tom speedily found Buckskin.

The faithful animal was greatly pleased at the meeting, and manifested his feelings by rubbing his velvety muzzle against the ranger's cheek.

Buckskin, strangely enough, still had his saddle and bridle on, as if for instant use.

As the horse Dancing Feather had ridden was not to be found, it was supposed that the animal had been overwhelmed in the water avalanche.

This being the case she decided upon a steed that seemed to possess good points. On this beast Tom quickly flung the Indian's bridle and saddle.

But Tucson Tom had no intention of leaving the other five horses behind, so he fastened them by a lariat in a string to the saddle-horn and having assisted the young girl to mount, sprung upon the back of his good Buckskin.

At that moment there came a flash from the grass near by, accompanied by the report of a gun.

The bullet whizzed by within an inch of the daring ranger's head.

They were discovered!

A shrill shout rung out as the unseen marksman realized that he had missed his mark.

No longer was there need of caution.

Safety now lay in the heels of their steeds and the sooner they left the vicinity of the timber the better.

Already answering cries were heard from the camp close by, and in several quarters more remote.

"Now for it, little gal!" cried the Bowie Bravo.

Off they started like a young whirlwind; the very air seemed to exhilarate them.

Behind they left their deadly foes, part of them mounted, the rest on foot.

Neatly had the Apaches been outwitted,

and Tom could afford to laugh when he once more pressed his knees against the sides of Buckskin.

That the pursuit was instantly begun, he knew full well.

It was a question of endurance and good fortune.

Dancing Feather shared his light spirits, and kept ever at his side.

Behind came the string of five mustangs; these Tom intended to cut loose when they had gone such a distance that there would be no possible chance of their falling into the hands of their owners, in time for them to take part in the pursuit.

The general direction taken by the fugitives was almost due south, and in the teeth of a strong wind.

The reason for this was because the *baranca* ran that way, and in the darkness of the night an attempt to cross this could only meet with disastrous results.

How many pursuers there were it was impossible to tell; but the ranger knew that the Apaches were holding their own, and this was something that did not please him.

After a time he let one of the led horses drop off, and then another, and a third, until all were gone.

The fugitives were now able to increase their speed a little.

As mile after mile was passed over they gained upon their pursuers, and at last no sounds from the rear were heard.

But Tom indulged in no wild hopes. He knew the wolf-like tenacity of the Apaches too well to think they had given up.

So long as the slightest chance of overtaking those they hunted remained, the red riders would push onward.

That was their nature.

He had hunted Apaches more than once, and been chased by them, so that experience was not lacking in his composition.

The horses responded nobly to the demands made upon their powers from time to time.

It was not Tom's policy, however, to urge them to too great a speed, as such a course would no doubt prove fatal to their hopes in the end.

He was satisfied with the progress they were already making, for if it could only be kept up until dawn they would have such a start of their pursuers that escape would be a settled fact, unless some unforeseen accident occurred.

That was nearer than they thought.

Dancing Feather's mustang set his left fore-hoof into the burrow of a prairie dog, and although it only sunk a portion of the way, the shock was great.

It was only through the fact of her being an expert rider that the girl saved herself from a fearful fall.

As it was, the mustang was found to have broken his leg just below the knee.

This was a pretty kettle of fish.

One horse now remained for the two of them, and strong and fleet as Buckskin undoubtedly was, he could not maintain a successful race against the wiry mustangs of their pursuers.

What was to be done?

How Tom wished they had retained one of the five led horses for some such emergency.

It was no use crying over spilled milk.

Some way out of the difficulty must be found, and no brain could conjure up a scheme more readily than that of Tucson Tom.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PRAIRIE FIRE.

DANCING FEATHER stands near the ranger.

Her eyes are upon him, for she realizes that another crisis in their affairs has been reached, and she is anxious to see what her companion will do about it.

Not that she for a moment doubts his ability to cope with the situation and snatch victory from seeming defeat.

She has too sincere a faith in her hero.

Only for the space of half a minute Tom stands thus.

Then he makes a quick move.

The girl sees him bend down and feel of the grass around them.

Then he begins to tear at it like one gone mad, but if this be so there must be a method

in his madness, for he cast the loose grass all in a little pile.

Dancing Feather utters a little cry.

Her Indian education serves her well, and now she comprehends what the idea is that has sprung into existence in his mind.

Speedily there is formed a little mound of dried grass.

Over this the ranger bends.

A light suddenly flashes up—the match is applied to the dry grass, and in another second the whole mass is in a flame.

The wind must do the rest.

It catches up the blaze, and sweeping it along the ground, finds more fuel to feed its voracious appetite.

Faster and faster it rushes along.

Fan-like it extends rapidly on either side, and the flames leap higher into the air as they gain new force.

It is now a solid wall of fire that goes rushing northward, and a low, roaring sound begins to make itself heard.

Water having failed to destroy his enemies valiant Tucson Tom had now let loose on them an avalanche of fire, to see what could be done by this element.

"Come, we must be off," he said, hoarsely, as above the roar of the fiery billow, during a slight calm in the wind his ear caught a chorus of excited yells far away.

Quickly both of them mounted.

Buckskin went off like the wind, but his double burden soon began to tell, and he reduced his pace.

The ranger now changed his course to some extent and aimed in a southeasterly direction.

As the *barranca* was no longer in his way he could do this with impunity.

More than once he looked back over his shoulder as though endeavoring to learn what the facts were with regard to their foes.

This was of course impossible.

The prairie fire lit up the horizon, but it was rapidly growing more dim, as though it had come across a barrier in the shape of the foot-hills, and was eating along their base, a piece of business that must come to an end when the *barranca* was reached.

Poor Buckskin was beginning to show decided signs of fatigue, although the noble steed made many a spurt, and kept right along with commendable grit.

He had passed through a serious pull of late, and this double burden was the last straw on the camel's back.

It had already become evident to the ranger that a halt must be called.

Could he only see his immediate surroundings he would be better satisfied.

How eagerly he scanned the eastern horizon for traces of the coming dawn.

It could not be far away.

Unless his eyes deceived him it was even then on the point of coming.

Wearily the way was continued.

There was a chance that they might have thrown the Indians off the trail by the turn they had taken, but the wily Apaches were very apt to judge the course likely to be pursued and regulate their own accordingly.

The dawn came on.

When the gray light had become strong enough for them to see their surroundings, they found that the face of the country had changed in a wonderful manner.

No longer did the level prairie confront them.

The land was first rolling and further on rough and rugged, with traces of volcanic upheavals in the dim ages gone by.

Such places are of frequent occurrence in Arizona, and are known as the "bad lands."

In some respects they resemble the famous "bad lands" not far from the Black Hills.

For more than one reason the ranger was glad to see this section.

He had been looking for it.

The coming of daylight would of course serve the fugitives well, but in another sense it could be looked on as a misfortune, for if their enemies were within seeing distance they would be apt to sight them before they could take shelter among the rocks of the "bad lands."

Then again it would give the Apaches an opportunity to follow their trail if they were at a loss to tell which way those they were seeking had gone.

Buckskin was urged on as fast as his condition would allow.

Half an hour before the rising of the sun they were among the rocks.

Tucson Tom had been running the matter over in his mind, and by this time he had settled upon his course.

At first glance it appeared that of a madman but there was deep wisdom back of it.

To plunge into the "bad lands" in their present crippled state, without a supply of food and water, would be seeking death, and the chances were ten to one against their even coming out again alive.

Had they decided to skirt the edge of the bad lands they must inevitably be overtaken by the Indians before the day was past.

It was because of this dilemma that the ranger decided upon a desperate plan which at least gave some hope of ultimate escape.

The Apaches must be few in number.

He would meet them in battle and try issues with them.

First of all he rode a mile along the edge of the rocky wilderness before plunging into it, and when this was done he retraced his way, only keeping within the line, to the point where they had first turned.

Here they hid.

There were two advantages in this.

They could look back over their trail and see for several miles out upon the prairie.

Should the Indians come in sight and prove too strong a party for Tom to carry out his design, they could withdraw quietly, and be making the best of their way on through the rough country while their pursuers were reaching that point and following their trail a mile or so along the edge, and back.

Tom looked to his weapons.

They were all in good trim.

Dancing Feather begged to take a part in the anticipated affair, but Tom would not hear of it, and insisted upon her remaining at a secure point in the rear, where she would be safe and could watch the conflict without any danger from flying lead.

The time passed slowly.

When the sun was half an hour high, the girl called his attention to the prairie.

Far out the glitter of lance-tips was seen as the sun shone upon them.

The enemy was in sight.

Soon they could be seen distinctly.

When the ranger could count the Indians he found that there were seven of them all told.

This proved them to be the party whom he had seen met by the brave mounted on the buckskin horse, and who had gone into camp just beyond the *barranca* near the foot-hills.

He decided to fight.

If they followed the trail closely they would come within ten yards of his place of concealment, and he believed it would be possible to clean them out so that there would be none left to tell tale.

For this he relied almost wholly upon his quick shooting.

How slowly the minutes passed.

The Apaches drew nearer, and the man behind the rocks knew his time was close at hand.

They had now reached the rolling ground.

For the time they stood out in bold relief, and then vanished from his view as they rode down into the little valley.

When they came up again they had decreased the space by half.

What was this?

Instead of seven there were but four!

The little party had divided!

Tucson Tom could hardly repress a cry of chagrin when he noted this fact, for it must play havoc with his plan.

Had the other three turned to one side to proceed down the depression, or were they loitering behind because of some little thing that had occurred to delay them?

This latter proved to be the case.

When the leading four arrived at the point where the trail turned sharply to the left, the three composing the rear guard had just come in sight upon the little elevation thirty yards away.

Though bitterly disappointed, nothing remained but for Tom to open fire.

CHAPTER XIII.

TEXAN TACTICS.

THERE was now no time to lose.

If the four Apaches once got past his place of concealment, they would give him serious

trouble, and might even gain shelter among the rocks before he could snuff them out.

They had just turned with the trail, after one glance toward the rocks, when Tucson Tom let his first revolver speak.

It was a death-shot.

The nearest Indian gave a shrill cry, and dropping his lance, fell forward upon his horse's neck.

As the animal, startled, darted away, the fingers of the wretched brave clutched a portion of its mane.

To this he held with the awful grip of death, and when he fell from his seat, was dragged along for a score of yards until the hoofs of the now stampeding animal tore him from his frenzied hold.

Tucson Tom paid no attention to this side-scene of the drama.

He was wholly wrapped up in what was going on in front, and he had no little task in hand to dispose of his foes.

No sooner had that first shot sounded, than each of the three remaining Apaches hastened to throw himself on that side of his mustang away from the rocks.

The action was like lightning, for the braves were as skillful in the maneuver as any wild Comanche of the Texan plains.

Despite their agility and readiness for action, the flight of lead was even more rapid.

Tom caught another fellow just as he was going over the back of his animal.

The bullet took him square in the middle of the forehead, and he dropped like a stone, while his steed ran wildly about.

This left two enemies in the immediate vicinity, and both of these were hidden from his view behind their mustangs.

Tucson Tom had understood this would be the case.

His long familiarity with Indian tactics had told him that at the first alarm those of the red-skins who were able, would fall out of sight behind their steeds.

An old Indian-fighter alone would know how to meet this emergency, and he proved his claim to that title by sending a couple of leaden missiles into the horses that sheltered with their bodies the red riders.

The idea was a success.

One of the mustangs made a wild leap, and falling over, crushed the human spider that had been clinging to his side, under him, pinning the rascal to the ground.

The other fell with simply a shudder, leaving his master, who had saved himself from the fate of his comrade by a quick leap, exposed to the fire of the pale-face.

He had his senses about him, and as the next best thing to do under the circumstances, bounded off eccentric angles, hoping in this manner to confuse the aim of the grim man who stood among the rocks, and looked along the shining barrel of his revolver.

He did not know his man.

When that revolver spoke it meant death.

The last of his four enemies went pitching forward and lay doubled up in a heap.

So far all was well.

Tucson Tom now turned his attention to the other part of the drama.

As he looked toward the spot where he had last seen the three Apaches, he was surprised and chagrined to find that they were no longer in sight.

Short as had been the time during which he was engaged with their companions, they had taken advantage of it.

Where had they gone?

As his eyes swept the stretch around, he saw one of the horses standing at a certain point, and this told him where his enemies were.

Tom now realized that he had work of a new order before him.

These three foes must be disposed of else they would make way with him.

They would not long remain idle, and once they managed to get in his rear, the game would be ended.

He kept as bright a lookout as was possible under the circumstances, but there were plenty of chances for those dusky snakes to slip over among the rocks without his being aware of the circumstance.

The first thing he really knew about the matter came in the shape of a scream from Dancing Feather.

Turning, he made a break for the spot

where he had left her in company with the faithful Buckskin.

As he rounded the rocks a deep thud that was full of significance reached his ear; and he was just in time to see a dusky figure flying through the air, with arms and legs projecting in every conceivable direction, and finally vanishing in between a couple of rocks.

Tucson Tom jumped at conclusions.

The attitude of his steed told him what had occurred.

Buckskin had found an opportunity to enter his vigorous protest against such a back-banded game, and as his hind hoofs struck the skulking Apache full in the chest as he was about to seize upon Dancing Feather, the result must have been to break some of the fellow's ribs.

Just as he appeared upon the scene a couple of guns spoke.

One of the bullets tore through the sleeve of Tom's coat, while the other hummed past his ear in a cheerful way.

He dropped in his tracks.

Dancing Feather was frozen to the spot with horror, and from the shelter of the rocks near by came two yelling, exultant devils glorying in the belief that they had finally "downed" the best man who had ever defied their tribe.

Half-way across the little plateau came the two Indian warriors.

The game seemed in their hands, and all they apparently had to do was to stretch out their hands and take it.

In this, however, they made a little mistake, and one that was to cost them dear.

Tom's stratagem had proven a complete success, and his foes were now just where he wanted them.

His arm was suddenly thrust out—there came a sullen plunging shot—a little wreath of white smoke curled up, and the leader of the Apache braves fell heavily on his face.

This did not stop the other.

He knew that only one course was open to him, and as the white ranger sprung to his knees the red-skin dashed forward.

There was some hope of his reaching the hunter before he could fire, but this was instantly put to flight.

As the Indian advanced he found himself glaring into the fatal tubes of that weapon which had already proven so destructive to his companions.

The ranger saw he had a brave man to deal with, and it cut him cruelly to be compelled to send the death-bullet; but the devilish look on the face of the Indian told that nothing would prevent him from carrying out his fiendish desires after death.

So his doom was sealed by the heavy report of the terrible revolver.

Tom had come out on top of the heap, and so far as he could now see his way was clear.

The Apaches had run against a hard customer when they tackled him, and there must be mourning in their tepees for a long time to come, over the terrible results of this trail.

It was easy work for the ranger to catch one of the horses.

After this he mounted Buckskin, and with Dancing Feather at his side, rode toward the east, keeping on the border of the bad lands.

He knew full well there were other bands of the Indians in search of them, and that too much care could not be taken in their further progress.

Once during the morning they sighted foes.

The Apaches were far out upon the prairie, and could hardly be told from antelopes.

Tom had secured a couple of Indian blankets, and these the fugitives now donned.

At the same time they took care to hide themselves among the rocks at the first favorable opportunity, and remained there until the hostile band had passed from sight.

The Indians were heading toward the point where our friends had first struck the bad lands, and if they kept on in this line, the result of the morning's desperate little affair must soon come under their notice; this meant a fresh pursuit.

Tom led his charge over the white soda

plain, across yawning *arroyos* that ribbed the land, and still on toward the land of the rising sun.

The day passed without any disturbance, and as night gathered her sable mantle over the scene, the brave ranger drew a sigh of relief, believing they were secure.

He could not see into the unknown future, or he might have despaired of reaching the end. New troubles awaited him.

CHAPTER XIV.

BUCKSKIN ON GUARD.

THE night was not so dark as that preceding it, the stars seeming to shine with a brilliancy they had not then shown.

Tom and his fair charge made a frugal meal from the exceedingly small stock of provisions which the ranger carried.

The latter was not entirely satisfied with their position.

Had the horses been less fatigued, and his companion a tough man instead of a frail girl, he would have insisted upon proceeding further before halting for the night.

As it was, they had been compelled to draw up upon the comparatively open plain.

True, no enemies had been in sight at sundown, and if he could be positive that their arrival had not been seen from some one of the many timber patches around, the Texan would have drawn a free breath.

He had no reason to complain of the conduct of Dancing Feather.

Through all of the astonishing trials that had come upon him, she had acted nobly, and Tom's heart had gone out to her more on this account than because she was pretty.

He now looked around for a place where she might sleep.

Gathering a heap of moss and leaves, he made as comfortable a bed as lay within his power.

Mabel thanked him sweetly.

He left her to seek slumber, while he made the circuit of their little camp to see that all was right.

It was in a patch of timber; the trees grew sparsely, and a little stream, bubbling out of the earth, flowed some ten yards or more and then vanished, to reappear again some distance off.

The murmur of this little spring made soothing music, that lulled the soul to slumber.

Tom halted outside the motte, and listened long and earnestly, while his eyes endeavored to pierce the darkness in the direction whence they had come.

He heard nothing suspicious.

The cooling night breeze fanned his bronzed cheek, and brought to his ear the sounds that may be heard during the hours of darkness upon any southwestern plain, but for these he had not a thought just then.

Finally he returned to the spot where he had left his charge.

Dancing Feather was asleep.

He had just reached her side when through the scant growth of trees toward the east he caught a quick glimpse of a moving light.

It flashed for an instant and then vanished.

Tom was startled.

Was it a signal?

He had seen a torch waved thus by an Apache and as readily understood by another miles away.

Filled with new apprehensions he hurried again to the edge of the little timber motte, and this time looked earnestly toward the east.

All was darkness there.

He could distinguish the faint outlines of one or two patches of trees close by, but they were almost wholly swallowed up in the great black chaos of uncertainty; yet around him, so peculiar was the starlight, he could almost make out the blades of grass.

For ten minutes he stood there and looked earnestly toward the east.

No further sign was vouchsafed him.

He was thus left in a dilemma and could not positively declare one way or the other.

What he had seen might have been the signal torch of an Indian, or else a meteor flashing through space.

There was nothing to make him believe one thing before the other.

As he saw nothing more of the strange light as time went by, he was inclined to believe it could only have been one of these

mysterious flights through space of a meteoric body, and upon this ground rest the case.

With this view of the matter he should have rested easy, but it was plain to be seen that he did not.

Once more he returned to camp.

The young girl still slumbered quietly, and for this Tom was glad, as she would need all the strength she could gather for the balance of her journey.

He looked around the camp for the last time preparatory to seeking rest himself.

The horses, fastened by lariats, were feeding upon the clumps of sweet grass to be found between the trees.

They appeared perfectly contented.

Tom fondled the velvety muzzle of his favorite steed a short time.

In Buckskin he knew he had a sentry who would signal the presence of danger should it come in the person of Indians, for whom he entertained the liveliest hatred.

More than once in the past, while camping alone on prairie or mountain, his master had been aroused by his shrill neigh or snort of alarm, and aroused himself just in time to escape danger, perhaps death.

He could generally sleep soundly even in a hostile country, when he had Buckskin to keep watch and ward over him.

On this occasion it was different.

He was not worrying now about himself, but on account of the charge he had.

His recent experience had proven that the Apaches were abroad in force, and that they would spare no effort to capture or destroy the daring man who had carried off the fair god they worshiped as the princess of the sun.

This was what made him unusually anxious and kept sleep from his eyes for some time.

Nature is all-powerful, however, and her demands are very hard to resist.

Lying there, Tom finally dropped asleep.

The cropping sound from the horses was the last thing he remembered hearing, as it was also the first he heard when he awoke.

He knew he had been asleep, perhaps for an hour or two.

Raising his head, he listened intently, the worrying thoughts that had occupied his mind before laying down coming back to him in the first moment of his wakefulness.

There was nothing suspicious to be heard.

Making up his mind to this fact presently, the Texan ranger once more shut his eyes, and allowed the drowsy god to steal away his senses in the lethargy of slumber.

Time wore on.

The heavenly constellations continued their never-ceasing march toward the west, and midnight had arrived ere Tom again awoke.

This time he did so with a start.

Some sound had aroused him.

Ah! it was repeated—the snort of a horse.

Buckskin's signal of danger.

The ranger was now fully aroused, and his mind grasped the situation.

He could still hear the cropping sound, but this was caused by the mustang of the young girl, which, being an Indian horse, had no particular reason for stopping his feeding even if red-skins were around.

Tucson Tom slowly raised his head, and then assumed a sitting posture, leaning up against a tree, at the foot of which he had been sleeping.

He seemed to feel the spirit of danger in the very air, and yet his quick ear caught no unusual sound that would tell of peril hovering over them.

The wolves had come nearer, and their howls went up from just beyond the fringe of trees, as though they scented fresh meat, which was of course not so, as there was nothing of the kind in camp.

This being the case, Tom wondered what had brought them around in such force.

In itself this was nothing to him.

Many a night he had slept as soundly as ever a babe could, while a circle of the uncanny brutes around his tent made the live-long night hideous with their howling chorus.

Tucson Tom was not long in making up his mind that there was something about that needed investigation.

He had drawn a revolver, and as he sat there, cast his eyes around him.

The two horses were in sight, one nipping at the herbage as though it could not find

the heart to leave its feast; the other standing with head raised, snuffing the air in alarm.

That was Buckskin.

The ranger listened, half-expecting to catch the distant rumble of horses' hoofs on the hard soil of the plain.

No such sound came to his ears.

Where did the danger lie?

He was about to arise and step to his horse, as though the noble animal could tell him its suspicions, when his eye was caught by a moving object just within the grove.

Instantly he glued his orbs upon it.

At first he could not make out what it was, so close to the ground did it crouch.

It was slowly drawing nearer, however, and his curiosity must soon be satisfied.

If an Indian he had a clumsy way of crawling, and Tom was speedily brought to acknowledge the fact that there was something very strange and mysterious with regard to the object.

At last it had drawn near enough for him to see more perfectly, and every muscle in his frame grew rigid as he watched it.

CHAPTER XV.

A NIGHT ATTACK.

HERE was reason for the ranger to survey the strange creature with astonishment.

It had now come close enough to the camp for him to make out its peculiarities, and surely these were marked enough.

To all appearances it was a wolf, yet never wolf acted as did this one.

The creature was lying flat upon the ground, and seemed to advance by drawing itself along.

Its head was always erect, and yet every now and then the brute raised itself up as if to gain a better observation.

This was what riveted the attention of the Texan ranger.

The truth leaped suddenly into his brain.

He was not long deceived.

The strange animal upon which his eyes rested was a man-wolf.

Beneath that wolf-skin crouched the dusky body of an Indian.

The consciousness that this was in all probability the case gave Tucson Tom a thrill, not of alarm, but excitement.

He comprehended now the meaning of the strange light he had seen earlier in the night.

It had been a signal after all.

No sooner had Tom arrived at this conclusion than he set about looking at the matter from every side so there should be no mistake made on his part.

If this was an Indian come to visit the camp and take observations so that his companions might follow and capture the whites as they slept, he must be put out of the way at once.

Tucson Tom arranged in detail what he should do then.

As soon as he fired the shot that laid the man-wolf low, he must spring to the side of Dancing Feather, hastily place her on her steed, and mounting Buckskin himself with the same swiftness, cut the lariats that held the animals, and speed away.

One thing troubled him.

This was his ignorance regarding the companions of the man-wolf.

Where were they?

What was their number?

Could he only have had these questions satisfactorily answered he would have been easier in his mind.

As it was he had to go at the matter in a blind way far from being satisfactory.

The red spy was now so close that Tucson Tom could hold his fire no longer.

He could even see the legs of the man beyond the skin of the gray wolf.

It was impossible to say whether the Indian saw him or not, but he was inclined to believe that this was not so, or the fellow would hardly have advanced as he did.

When he found he had his revolver on a line with the seeming animal's breast, he pulled the trigger.

The report rung out with sudden distinctness on the calm night air.

Tom sprang to his feet.

He was just in time to see the man-wolf spring up, and in his dying throes cast the gray skin from him.

At the same moment there pealed from his lips a piercing yell.

It was answered.

To the surprise and consternation of the ranger there rose up here and there other men-wolves—half a dozen at least.

They had surrounded the camp.

Well it was that Tucson Tom was a man of iron nerve, and ready to meet any emergency, however sudden.

He had need of all his powers then.

To hesitate would have been to lose the game for the Indians were not wasting time, but as they leaped erect bounded forward.

Then the brave Texan's revolver began to speak.

Its thunder tones were not to be disregarded no matter how valiant they who opposed him.

In the midst of his fusillade he saw Dancing Feather near him.

"The horses! Mount!" he cried.

She caught at his idea.

Tucson Tom, still playing his weapons in quick succession saw her run to the steed that had borne her thither, and leap upon its back with the grace of a fawn.

He was also working his way thither, step by step, and even while he swept the field in order to keep his revolvers playing, he had rested one eye upon Buckskin.

The intelligent horse as though understanding the necessities of the case, now came up to where the ranger stood.

Tom saw his opportunity.

The whirlwind of fire which he had let loose upon the Apaches, had demoralized them to a dreadful extent.

They had vanished from view.

Some were undoubtedly struck by the balls for the aim of the Bowie Bravo was terrible even under such disadvantages.

The others had thrown themselves upon the ground again and were taking advantage of every tree and bush to screen them from that fearful fire.

Tucson Tom now had his chance.

He whipped out a knife.

Two slashes were made and the lariats that held the horses were severed as though by the power of magic.

It was all over like a flash.

"This way, Mabel!"

As he uttered these words the ranger put out his hand and caught the rude rope bridle more like a halter than anything else, which was upon the piebald Indian mustang.

They tore off through the trees.

A chorus of howls from behind told of the keen disappointment their flitting brought to those determined spirits who had so longed to possess the scalp of the white ranger.

In one thing Tom was favored.

The Indians would not fire upon him when there was danger of hitting the one they worshiped as a god.

Thus no shots were fired after them, and yet they knew the Indians had started in pursuit, for their cries told this much.

As soon as they were free from the trees Tucson Tom gave the rope into the hands of the young girl, knowing that she was equal to the task of managing her own steed.

He had chanced to reach the plain on that side where he had seen the mystic light earlier in the night.

This did not suit him at all.

If there were more of the Indians near by it was likely that they would be found in this direction.

Tucson Tom therefore turned to the left and headed north.

His revolvers were not yet empty and he held them in his hands again, ready to meet a new emergency.

It was destined to come.

They had gone perhaps a hundred yards from the little timber motte where their camp had been laid, and were rapidly leaving the yelling men-wolves behind, though they stuck to the pursuit with a pertinacity that at once aroused a suspicion in the mind of the ranger, when in front of them there suddenly appeared a body of mounted foes.

It was almost impossible to tell where they had come from.

Perhaps they had been hidden in one of the many clumps of timber that seemed to abound in this especial section.

No one cared to inquire particularly with regard to this matter.

It was enough for the Texan to know that they were there before him.

He saw his danger.

To turn was to destroy all chance of escape, for the enemy would shoot him down as he passed by, or else cut him off.

Nothing was left to be done but to go forward like a bolt of lightning, clearing a way through the red ranks by the swiftness of his passage, and the irresistible nature of his onset.

He gave vent to the Texan yell that has many a time sounded upon the dreary plains of the Lone Star State.

Buckskin responded nobly to his cry.

Forward went the yellow horse and his indomitable rider.

Dancing Feather saw and understood what were the tactics of her valiant lover.

She urged her mustang forward also, intending keeping close beside him, so that she might share in the results of the dash.

As he struck the Apache band Tucson Tom opened fire right and left.

Had his revolvers been freshly charged he would beyond a doubt have scattered the whole of his foes to the four winds.

As it was, after his second shot each way his revolvers gave out.

This was unfortunate, but there was no help for it.

He replaced his revolvers in his belt as best he could, and snatching out a long bowie-knife in each hand, began to use them in a manner terrible to behold.

Tucson Tom was in his element, and for the time being counted not the odds.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE APACHE CAMP.

THE Bowie Bravo possessed such a spirit of warfare, that, when fully aroused by the heat of battle he became a perfect demon.

In the ancient days it was the custom to attach short sabers to the wheels of a chariot, and as the driver dashed through the crowded ranks of the foe, he would leave behind a clean-cut, bloody trail.

So it seemed with Tom.

His two bowies flashed through the air as though driven by machinery, and behind him he left a swath as wide as the steel weapons could reach.

The Apaches were appalled by the wonderful fierceness of his assault, and could do nothing to kill him in the brief space of time allowed them.

Tom had burst through his foes.

He could hear the steady tramp of a horse just behind him, and this told him the young girl was safe.

He continued on for a quarter of a mile.

Then distant shouts reached his ear—shouts that were tinged with joy and satisfaction.

A dreadful suspicion entering his mind, Tom turned in his seat.

The mustang was indeed following some ten feet behind him, as Mabel had deftly knotted the remnants of the two lariats.

To the amazement and consternation of the Texan, he saw that the animal was riderless.

Great Heaven! where was Dancing Feather?

Those yells told him all.

While she was following him through the ranks of the enemy, some wily fellow had lifted her bodily from her seat.

If she had screamed, the sound was lost in the rattling cries that accompanied the rapid transit of Tom through the Indian band.

Dancing Feather was now in the hands of the Apaches.

It must be he who would become the pursuer.

Tucson Tom shut his teeth hard.

He vowed by everything sacred that she should be saved from their hands, if he was obliged to kill every member of the band.

First of all he proceeded to reload his weapons, knowing what need he would have of them.

This gave him twelve shots, and unless his hand had forgotten its cunning he believed he would be able to accomplish all he desired ere this supply was exhausted.

One thing gave him hope.

The Apaches seemed to look on him as a robber, and persisted in the belief that Dancing Feather had been carried away from her

home in their fortified town in the mountains wholly against her will.

This being the case they were not apt to secure her in any way.

Having finished reloading his weapons, the Texan considered what next he should do.

He decided to advance.

The Indians had made no move to leave the spot, nor was there any pursuit instituted.

Evidently they had seen quite enough of the pale rider on the yellow horse, and hoped he would not cease his mad flight until he had gained the settlement.

They knew not the Bowie Bravo.

He was willing to risk his life again in the future as he had in the past, for the fair young Princess of the Sun who had stolen his heart, and who seemed to possess besides some mysterious influence over him.

Not long in making up his mind, Tucson Tom staked the piebald mustang as best he could, hoping to find him again should he have need of the animal's services.

Then, mounted on Buckskin he set about retracing his course.

This was a comparatively easy matter.

The Indians had entered the grove and proceeded to make merry over the retaking of the young Princess of the Sun.

Already a fire had been started.

As Tucson Tom drew near he could see them carrying in the dead and wounded.

It would not do to go nearer on horseback.

Thus far his approach had been quiet and without noise, but the Indians must surely have posted vedettes, and unless he was exceedingly careful, the report of a gun, and the cutting of a leaden messenger through muscle and sinew would be his first intimation of danger.

He left Buckskin alone, unfettered.

The horse would not stray from the spot and at the first signal from him would gallop to his side like the wind.

He now approached the grove on foot.

As he drew nearer his caution increased and it was not misplaced, for presently he saw the figure of an Indian vedette.

The man was outlined against the sky.

Remembering how he had been able to see the man-wolf as it crawled toward him, Tom did not try to pass the vedette until he had given him a wide berth.

He managed to reach the trees at last.

The shelter here was sparse, but by keeping to a certain side he could creep forward under the bushes unobserved.

What were the Apaches about to do?

He saw them about the fire, and it was not long before his eyes fell upon Dancing Feather, seated just where she had been sleeping when the alarm came.

How different must be her feelings.

She strove to control herself so that the Indians could read nothing from her face.

This was rare diplomacy.

She had been instructed by her lover as to the course to pursue in the event of capture.

When the ranger's eyes rested upon the long line of dead and wounded he felt a savage thrill of satisfaction at his work.

Unless he could effect the rescue of Mabel by some cunning trick, he meant to increase the length of that line ere he was done with it.

The Indians were going through some sort of ceremony, and when Tom saw a rudely painted representation of the sun on a piece of dressed skin, he realized that they were doing some religious ceremony.

He tried to count them.

Thanks to the execution he had already done among them their numbers were few.

By degrees the spirits of Tucson Tom, which had fallen to zero, began to revive.

With each passing moment he saw a new and better prospect for a rescue.

He lay there like a stone as time passed on, waiting for the Indians to grow weary and seek rest in slumber.

This they were slow in doing.

One by one however they lay down after wrapping themselves in their blankets, and soon their stentorian breathing announced that they were in the clutches of the dream-god.

By this time the ranger was growing more than a trifle uneasy.

What meant this?

Was it imagination or did he really see objects around him much better than a short time previous?

He knit his brows, and then as he made a certain discovery started as though he had been made the recipient of an electric shock.

Dawn was approaching!

When he was aroused by the snorting of the faithful Buckskin he had believed that the hour was about midnight, but now he realized that it must have been some time later.

There was no gainsaying the fact—the gray dawn was at hand.

To delay longer would be fatal to all his plans.

Prompt action was all that would answer.

He swept a last glance around him.

So quickly was the pall of night fading before the approach of the day king, that already one could see quite a little distance out upon the plain, and but for the fact that Buckskin had probably lain down he must have been discovered by this time by the argus-eyed vedettes along the border of the timber.

Tucson Tom's eyes were glued upon the camp among the trees.

The Indians seemed pretty generally asleep.

Could he signal to Mabel?

She still sat there.

Her face was toward him and it was evident that she had not let her eyes close in slumber since the awful awakening.

He was just about to rise up and beckon for her to come to him, while he covered the slumbering Indians with his revolvers, and made ready to pour a volley into their midst at the first movement, when a sound struck on his ear that made him pause.

He lowered his head to the ground.

There came to him the unmistakable sound of many horses' hoofs beating the turf.

At the same moment one of the vedettes came in on the run.

Tucson Tom saw that his chance was gone. It had been snatched from his grasp, just when he was about to seize it.

Gritting his teeth he remained there, his eyes glued upon the camp.

If the Indians made a move as though they were about to fly with the young girl he was ready to open upon them.

A jabbering was taking place.

Then all eyes were turned upon a second vedette who came hurrying in.

"Yengees!" was the word that fell from his lips.

It explained all.

CHAPTER XVII.

A BATTLE AND A RACE.

TUCSON TOM heard that word with more pleasure than he would possibly have confessed.

It meant assistance.

A party of whites had come upon the scene, and the new-comers were even then bearing down upon the trees, as the thunder of hoofs, distinctly heard, proved beyond a doubt.

They must have learned of the presence there of the Apaches, and were seeking an encounter.

Hurried preparations were made.

At first Tom believed the Indians were about to take to flight, but when he was almost in the act of disclosing his presence by a shot, he realized his error.

The young Priestess of the Sun was given in charge of two braves, while the rest hurriedly mounted their horses and snatched up their guns and lances.

They meant to fight.

And this told the concealed ranger that the body of whites approaching could not be large in point of number.

That it gave him much satisfaction, the reader can rest assured.

He saw the main body of Apaches dash out of the timber and form in line to the south of the trees, and heard their defiant yells answered by hoarse shouts from the plain.

The Apaches now put their horses in motion.

It is generally their line of tactics to strike an enemy and not sustain the shock themselves, and as the whites were still coming forward the Apaches could not afford to hold back.

Although not properly horse Indians like the Comanches, the Apaches ride well and seem complete masters of their steeds.

Tom watched the scene, although he did not forget to also keep an eye on the two guards of Dancing Feather.

The dawn was strong enough for him to discover that the Apaches had made a mistake when they announced the new-comers as "Yengees."

"Mexicans, by thunder!" muttered Tom.

It was easy to distinguish this fact.

He was puzzled to place them, for they were not in uniform, nor did they carry lances, so that this precluded all possibility of their being soldiers.

On the other hand, they did not seem to be the peons and *vaqueros* of a hacienda, for such men would never have exhibited the boldness these worthies were proving in thus making a dash upon a force of Indians whose number even they were ignorant of.

If Tom had a suspicion flash into his mind, no word of it escaped his lips.

He saw the two lines come together with a clash, in which the rattling of Indian lances, the quick report of firearms, and the shouts of all the combatants, united to make deafening.

This much met his gaze; then his attention was attracted by the actions of Dancing Feather's guards.

Whether these fellows were acting under orders, or from a general sense of caution and a fear that their comrades were bound to be whipped in this encounter, it mattered not, for the result was the same.

They brought up three mustangs, and assisting Mabel to mount one, leaped upon the backs of the other two.

Tom had his revolver ready, and he stepped forward so that his aim might be untrammelled when the proper time came for him to fire.

As he was behind the two Indians, they having their attention riveted upon the battle out on the plain, they saw him not.

The scene beyond had now reached its climax, and Tom could not help but find some interest in it.

The Mexicans had proved their valor.

Their dash was proof against the fierce energy of the Apaches, who, endeavoring to fight after their own manner from behind their steeds, had been brought into close quarters by the onward sweep of their foes.

For a few minutes the scene had been inspiring to the highest degree.

Horses reared and plunged, weapons crashed, the brown bodies of the Apaches fell out of sight again and again behind their steeds, only to reappear when threatened by a new enemy.

The dusky riders were no match for their foes, as was evident to an experienced observer like the ranger, from the beginning.

True, they seemed to disable about as many of the Mexicans as they suffered loss themselves, but the latter had the advantage, and bore upon them so heavily, that they were broken and fled in hot haste.

It was at this moment that a guttural cry from one of the guards told Tucson Tom that as they turned to fly with their charge, his presence among the trees had been discovered.

One of the men urged his horse toward him, and lowering the lance he carried, bent over to one side, intending to thrust him through.

The laudable intention was not fated to be carried out, however.

Tucson Tom looked him calmly in the face.

He did not even seem to think it worth his while to raise the revolver he held and glance along the barrel, but fired while holding it near his waist.

The fellow was upon him.

He made a vicious lunge at the ranger which Tom escaped by stepping back.

As soon as he had passed by, the unlucky brave dropped his lance and then pitched head-foremost from his steed.

The Bowie Bravo's bullet had done its work after all.

Tucson Tom had known full well where the brave was struck, and he had not vouchsafed him a glance after the fellow had passed.

His attention was now wholly taken up with the other warrior.

This worthy had a precious regard for his own carcass, and when his companion threw him the rope by which Mabel's horse was led and made a lunge toward the white ranger, he urged his own steed toward the edge of the grove, intending to escape with his charge while he yet had time.

With rare cunning he threw himself upon one side of his mustang when he saw the fate of his comrade.

Thus the Texan could not get a shot at him, and all the while the fellow was making off at an increasing speed, drawing the steed on which Dancing Feather was mounted after him.

The situation was a novel one.

Once he reached the plain, and a mad race would have to be entered upon, the finale of which no one could possibly foresee.

Tucson Tom, as the only resource, sprung to the mustang so hastily vacated by the red rider who had held the lance.

At the same time he gave vent to the shrill whistle by means of which he was accustomed to calling his faithful Buckskin.

By this time the Indian had burst from the timber, and the ranger was already in full pursuit.

In the gray of the morning, the victorious Mexicans saw this singular spectacle—an Indian warrior crouching low upon the back of his steed, and shielded by the rider of the horse he led behind, chased by a white man also on a mustang, who every now and then turned to give vent to a shrill whistle, and watch the progress of the buckskin steed that was thundering along in their rear, and constantly gaining.

Buckskin was responding nobly.

Dancing Feather kept her seat well, and this was about all she could do when rushing along at that mad pace, though had she possessed a knife of any sort she might have severed the rope which was held by the Indian guard, and thus have set herself free.

The Indian without knowing it, had been constantly pulling his horse around by the action of his knees.

He was thus making a great circuit, and was now heading directly for the grove again.

It was fortunate for somebody that in this wild dash they did not come across any of the brave's comrades.

The Texan had his revolver ready and would have used it to advantage.

At last there was a whinny beside him.

Buckskin forged up alongside the mustang as if he knew what was desired of him.

Without diminishing his speed to any perceptible degree, Tucson Tom managed to make the transfer, leaping upon the back of his brave horse with the grace of an acrobat.

Ah! the game is in his hands now.

How quickly he draws upon the fugitive.

The Apache, looking back sees it and his cunning black eyes gleam like the little orbs of a rat at bay.

Nothing can save him now.

Buckskin annihilates the distance separating him from the object of his pursuit.

More than a dozen eyes are watching the strange contest.

The Mexicans have drawn near, and they hold their breath with intense interest.

Just as the trees are again reached the Bowie Bravo is seen to rise in his stirrups.

They see his arm extended.

There is a puff of white smoke—a sharp report rings out on the morning air, and the poor devil of an Apache rolls in a ball on the ground.

The queer race has ended where it begun!

CHAPTER XVIII.

CORTINA, THE BORDER TIGER.

The work had been well done.

Dancing Feather was unhurt, and in another moment Tucson Tom had gained her side, so that together they entered the timber.

The Mexicans, all that were left of the little party that had come in contact with the Apaches, now came forward.

Tucson Tom felt that there was more trouble brewing, but he made up his mind that he would not run from it.

He kept his weapons where they could be easily reached, and calmly awaited the coming of the Mexicans.

They presently rode into the timber.

There were some half a dozen of them, several others being engaged in catching the

mustangs that were scattered here and there upon the plain, and which fell easy victims to their prowess.

At the head was a man whose bold face Tucson Tom remembered to have seen before.

The recollection that crowded into his mind with its presence did not seem to disturb him; on the contrary he shut his teeth more firmly together, as though resolved to face the music no matter what threatened.

When the Mexicans came up within a dozen feet or more of where Tucson Tom sat upon his horse, that worthy suddenly drew out a revolver and pulled back the hammer.

"Halt! where you are, gentlemen!"

The Mexicans did so.

While his four companions looked about with signs of wonder, the leader fastened his black eyes on the Texan and scowled, after which he laughed in a hoarse manner.

"Bravo! my bantling. *Carramba!* I am forced to admire the success of your chase. You have rescued the young senorita and saved us the labor of doing so."

"You knew she was a prisoner, then?"

"Si, senor. One of my men came here as a spy, saw the senorita and made his report. That was the reason of our charge. *Carissima!* we were even then on our way to effect the rescue of this girl, so that we are saved much trouble."

"You recognize her?"

"As Dancing Feather, the Priestess of the Sun. We were sworn to take her away from the power of the Apaches."

"How came you to take such an oath?"

The other laughed coarsely.

"*Cospita!* my young brave, that is no concern of yours."

"Because I know it already."

"I won't tell you you lie, for it is a matter of total indifference to me, but I feel, young senor, that I am placed under obligations to you for your rescue of the senorita."

"Not at all."

Tom was as *nonchalant* as though he were engaged in friendly conversation with men he knew and respected, yet he was now dead certain that in a very short space of time he must be pitted against these five ruffians, even as he had been pitted against the Apaches.

The very nature of the case made this a positive fact.

He had jumped to conclusions, and as was nearly always the case he was right.

Hence, when he uttered those few words his hand, as if unconcernedly, fell upon his second revolver.

The next instant it was in his grasp.

Then he felt secure.

"Will you stay and take breakfast with us, young senor?" asked the leader, as his men threw themselves to the ground.

"We have far to go. If you will pardon us, senor, we will start now."

"You speak for yourself."

"And this young lady."

"*Vaya!* she remains with us!"

"She goes with me!"

There was something in the voice of the American that caused a dark frown to settle upon the face of the Mexican leader.

He seemed to realize that for once he had met with a man who dared face him and defy him.

Bending his black orbs upon Tom he strove to cow him by a savage look, but the Bowie Bravo had seen too much of this thing, and he gave him back look for look in the most unconcerned manner in the world.

"*Carajo!* young Hotspur, once for all I say to you the senorita goes with us!"

"Once for all I tell you, senor, she remains with me!"

"We have sought her by the command of one who is her nearest relative."

"But who is also her deadliest foe. What you have meant to do is no affair of mine. I have alone and unaided carried her from the Apache town, baffled all those sent out in pursuit of her, and feel myself fully competent to assume all charge of her without any aid from your party, thank you."

"*Demonio!* you young devil, perhaps you do not know to whom you speak."

"I think I have seen you before."

"I am General Cortina, the boldest raider of the border. My name is my guaranty for bravery."

"I am Tucson Tom, the Bowie Bravo. Yonder lie my guaranty."

The ranger nodded to the left, and as the notorious outlaw turned his gaze in that direction, he saw such a ghastly array of dead and wounded Apaches stretched in a row that he was forced to utter a cry of amazement.

His face lighted up for a moment.

If there was one thing Cortina hated in this world, it was an Apache, though more than once he had struck a compact with the dusky, long-haired giants of the mountains, and taken them with him on his cattle-raids.

At present it was war to the knife between them, as was proven by the fierceness of their collision a short time previous.

"Is that all your work, young senor?" he demanded, quickly.

"That is only a part of it. Up at the base of the foot-hills you will find a lot more of these fellows, with a grizzly they set on me. I trust you are satisfied, General Cortina, and will not attempt to carry out your threat."

"You are a brave man, Tucson Tom, and *por dios*, if it were not for this senorita who comes between, I should like to shake your hand. I say you are a brave man, but do not let me think you a fool. No man in his senses would dare to brave the Tiger of the Border, as I am called. You must let the senorita go with us."

"Not unless I too bear you company to the settlements," said Tom, firmly.

"That is impossible."

"Then we will leave it to the girl. Mabel, would you rather go with these men, or remain in my company?"

Dancing Feather's eyes flashed.

She turned a look of ineffable scorn upon the leader of the Mexicans.

"With you, always with you, Tom," she replied in a steady tone.

"That settles it," said Tom grimly.

Cortina, the border scourge, as dashing a raider as was ever known, seemed taken aback by this astonishing action of the other.

He had known some desperate scenes in his life, but this cool defiance beat all.

"What will you do?" he asked.

"Kill every mother's son of you if you dare to cross my path. Mabel, ride over yonder and out on the plain to where the crossed trees stand. I'll join you when this little affair is settled."

Cortina's followers looked at each other and then glanced significantly from the Bowie Bravo to the ghastly line that bore witness to his prowess in battle.

The "little affair" he spoke of so lightly might wind up with their constituting a second row.

Such a possibility was far from pleasing and it made them wince.

Still they were one and all desperadoes whose hands had been dyed with innocent blood more than once, and when their leader said "go in" they generally obeyed.

As for Cortina himself he seemed puzzled just how to act.

He was not used to being thwarted in his plans, especially when his foes outnumbered the enemy five to one.

There was that in the looks and manner of the Texan, besides his awful record as a fighter as witnessed in the dead Apaches, that warned the freebooter what he might expect should he insist upon the course he had marked out for himself.

Dancing Feather rode slowly away, turning to look back anxiously toward the brave who had defended her so nobly, and was even then risking his life for her sake.

Tucson Tom could see her plainly without twisting his neck out of place.

He had pulled back the hammers of both his revolvers, and seated on his buckskin steed he waited quietly until the girl rider had left the wood and was well on her way out to the spot where two trees, growing in a moist place had their trunks crossed by some freak of nature forming an X.

When she reached this spot, Tucson Tom changed his careless attitude for one of resolution, and bringing his powerful eye to bear on Cortina, the border scourge, he said in ringing tones:

"Now, gentlemen, I am at your service!"

CHAPTER XIX.

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE TIMBER.

THE Mexican saw plainly that there was nothing of braggadocio about the Texan—he meant every word he said.

That he would of his own free will urge battle against five men, and they some of the most notorious characters of the border, was a fact proven by his actions as well as his words.

Ready—for what?

The desperadoes looked at one another again.

Then the grin upon their faces settled into a hard look.

Tom was a brave man—there was no gain-saying that—but if he would be so foolish as to run his head against the rocks, he had only himself to blame.

He had dared them to battle in a way that left them no escape.

Having confidence in their own prowess, there was not one of them but who believed in his own mind that the rash ranger was courting his doom.

Cortina himself may have felt some little scruples about giving the signal that would prove the death of this brave man.

It would not be the first time he had murdered a brave man, and when the affair came as a part of his duty, what fault could he find?

So he crushed down such feelings with an iron hand, and turned his full attention toward the matter in question.

That the disposal of the young ranger would prove a much tougher task than some of them anticipated, Cortina knew full well.

He had met such men before.

There was that in the manly bearing, the clear, resolute eye, and the positive words of the young man, that told him the latter meant all that he said.

Besides, there were the two revolvers, and they had an ugly look.

Tom seemed to be glancing from one to another of the desperadoes, as though selecting the men upon whom he might first try the weapons he held in his grasp.

But this gave them an uneasy feeling.

Each fellow felt as though he were doomed to drop off suddenly.

When General Cortina raised his hand, they would spring like panthers.

Perhaps the Mexican chief might have hesitated to assault this terrible Texan with but four men belonging to his company, but he had noticed a certain thing that gave him much ground for hope.

This lay in the fact that one of the men had managed to get around to the rear of the ranger.

Apparently his presence was unnoticed.

Upon this man depended the whole battle.

Cortina might have waited until this worthy could draw a pistol and shoot the ranger in the back, but he was so afraid lest the Texan should discover the fellow through some incautious move of his, such as the clicking of the pistol-lock, that he hastily gave the signal.

This was done by raising his hand.

It was a well-known signal with the four desperadoes, and they could not by any possibility mistake it.

Nor did they.

A simultaneous yell broke from the lips of the three who were on a line with Cortina, and as though they had suddenly been seized with a fit, they began leaping about like so many jumping harlequins.

Now this was done to distract the attention of the Texan for a brief space of time, during which it was their intention to draw their weapons and open upon him, in case their comrade had not already done the work.

With some men this might have worked.

Their frantic gyrations were certainly of an order to astonish one, and before this feeling could be overcome they would be ready for business.

Not so Tucson Tom.

He had been too long in the business of hunting desperadoes not to know what tricks and devices they were apt to resort to.

As the men in front of him started into this little game, he threw both revolvers forward and brought them to bear.

The sharp reports followed.

Tom had not fired in vain.

One of the men went down with a bullet lodged somewhere in his breast, while a second began hopping about in a manner quite different from his recent performance, having been struck in the fleshy part of the leg.

So far as the fight was concerned, he was now virtually out of it.

Having delivered these telling shots, Tom, with exceeding quickness, threw one leg over the back of his horse and dropped to the ground.

All this in a second of time.

As he went down he managed in some mysterious way to pull back the hammer of one revolver, so that he was ready for business again the second his feet touched the earth.

Had the ranger been fully aware of what was occurring in his rear he could not have timed his descent with more success.

At the very instant of his fall, there sounded the crack of a pistol back of him.

This from the fellow who had managed to gain his rear by trickery.

Tucson Tom instantly let fly from behind the shelter of his horse, and the remaining man beside Cortina doubled himself up as if suddenly overtaken by a terrible pain.

This left but two.

One of these, Cortina himself, was in front, while the other was in his rear.

The latter worthy claimed his first attention.

Foiled in his shot by the unexpected action of the ranger, the Mexican had drawn his *machete* and now sprung boldly forward.

Tucson Tom never refused such a challenge.

It might have been policy perhaps to have first disposed of Cortina, before engaging in a hand to hand conflict, but this was a time when action and thought went hand in hand.

He was upon the fellow like a whirlwind.

One revolver had been dropped, and in its place he now held a glittering bowie.

The Mexican, though amazed at his sudden action, was ready for him, and as the blades crossed he knew his doom was sealed.

He had met his master!

Desperation nerved his arm.

Possibly he hoped for assistance from his chief who was near by.

Be that as it may he proved no coward, though the awe-inspiring presence of the ranger had struck a chill to his heart.

Cut and slash they went at it.

Bowie opposed to *machete*.

Tucson Tom had not forgotten Cortina.

He knew the Border Tiger stood there with his hand outstretched—that in this hand was a pistol which he was simply waiting for an opportunity to discharge.

The ranger was ready to meet him half way.

He still held a revolver in his other hand and with his thumb had drawn back the hammer so that had he chosen now he might have ended his present fight with a bullet.

This he scorned to do.

He was a match for three such men as the one who was blindly wielding the *machete* and giving him any number of opportunities to strike home.

The reason why he had not ended the affair before now was because he was looking out for Cortina.

Finally the time arrived when he could no longer delay the finishing stroke.

It was given.

The long bowie blade flashed through the air, and sweeping the Mexican's weapon out of the way, plunged it into his side, cutting through muscle and sinew with the keenness of a razor.

There was a yelp from the man.

He believed his end had come, though such was not the case, and whirling around he sunk to the ground in a heap.

Tucson Tom had withdrawn his bowie-blade almost as speedily as it had been shot forward, and the bloody weapon was still held in his hand.

Cortina saw his opportunity.

He fired.

As it was no part of the ranger's plan to stand and be made a target of by one whom he knew through reputation to be a death-shot, he had leaped to one side and behind a tree with the speed of thought.

Hence, although there could be no doubt as to the intentions of the bandit, his ex-

cution was miserable, owing to this sudden change of base on the part of his foe.

It was now Tucson Tom's turn.

With the crack of his weapon, Cortina uttered a cry of mingled rage and pain, and dropping his weapon, let his arm fall to his side in a way that told the story.

It was shattered!

The ranger, seeing that all danger was past, now made his appearance again.

"General!" he said, "I hope you are satisfied."

There was irony in his tone, and the Border Tiger's face was dark as a thundercloud as he growled:

"*Carajo!* for the present, yes; but you have not seen the last of Cortina, Tucson Tom!"

At this moment a woman's cry of distress came floating from the plain.

The ranger with one wild leap was on Buckskin, and speeding like a meteor through the timber.

CHAPTER XX.

THE CRACK OF DOOM.

WHEN Tucson Tom burst out from among the trees, he saw a sight that stirred his blood.

Once again Dancing Feather was in danger.

She had been so earnestly engaged in looking toward the timber, knowing that those pistol-shots meant that her lover was in deadly danger, that she had not noticed the speedy approach of a man on horseback until he was at her side.

This worthy was one of Cortina's men.

He did not know what was going on within the grove, but having been among the Apaches, he recognized the girl as the one they sought, and had hence sought to capture her.

Tucson Tom shot out of the timber like a streak of fire.

His course was straight toward the spot where stood the Cross Trees.

Had the young girl been armed, she would no doubt have defended herself against the ruffian, for her Indian education must have given her strength of character.

Unfortunately, she possessed not a weapon of any kind.

All she could do was to give that scream, and then endeavor to cause her horse to rear up and break away from her captor.

She knew full well that if her lover was alive and within hearing distance of that sound, he would fly to her assistance.

There was fury stamped upon the face of the Texan as he thus rushed to the rescue.

An attempt on his own life he could forgive—that might come from brave men, and he had just shown that he could be merciful by wounding instead of shooting to kill, in what he had recently done.

This was a far different case.

The wretch upon whom he was now rushing had his hands upon Mabel, and she was so sacred in the eyes of the ranger, that the man who touched her must die.

Cortina rushed to the edge of the timber to see the drama.

He took it all in at a glance.

When he saw Buckskin and his master thus bearing down upon the Cross Trees, he gave the fellow there up for lost.

Nothing could save him.

Dancing Feather, too, caught sight of the one thus approaching, and her cry of delight at thus realizing that Tom had not only come out of the battle in the timber unharmed but was flying to her relief, must have reached the ear of the Mexican desperado who had hold of her.

He looked, and was amazed.

From the rattle of firearms in the timber, he had been of the opinion that the man who rode the yellow horse had by this time been quite riddled with bullets.

There was considerable difference between capturing a lone, unprotected and unarmed girl, and attempting the same thing when he saw rushing down upon him, like a devil incarnate, the man who had just issued from a fight with five desperadoes.

The fellow seemed to think so at any rate.

Taking advantage of his momentary consternation, the girl broke away from him.

He still held the rope of the horse upon which she was mounted, however—the same fatal rope that had been clasped by the Indian

brave whom Tom had chased and finally slain.

Now the ranger saw him draw a pistol.

Was he getting ready for fight?

The answer came speedily but in a way that took the Texan by surprise and at the same time filled him with consternation.

As the wretch drew this weapon, he aimed it at the young girl.

She was only a dozen feet away, and his object was, beyond all doubt, murder.

He knew why Cortina sought her.

That worthy had forgotten the pain of his wounded arm, and stood upon the border of the trees watching this strange drama with an interest that glued his eyes on those central figures.

If the Mexican would only carry out his fell purpose, Cortina felt that his object would be accomplished, and hence it was he held his breath as he looked upon the scene.

The man's weapon cracked!

Dancing Feather no longer sat upon her mustang.

Had she been struck?

The bullet was sent by a murderous hand that did not often miss its mark.

Cortina had seen the true state of affairs, and let fall a string of oaths.

The girl had resorted to an Apache trick, which she had carried out almost if not quite as well as it might have been done by the original owner of the mustang on which she was mounted.

She had vanished over the side of the steed with an adroitness that Tom never forgot.

It relieved his mind instantly of the load that had oppressed it.

At the same time he was ready for business.

The Mexican realized, even as he pressed the trigger, that he had been cheated of his intended prey, and uttering a cry like the snarl of an enraged wolf, he turned his attention to snatching out his *machete*.

He was undoubtedly a fool.

The death of the young girl could not possibly do him any good if his own life was bound to be sacrificed immediately after.

In his confusion he did not see this, the one idea in his mind being the order he had received from his leader to mete out death to the Priestess of the Sun, no matter where or under what circumstances they met her.

During this interval, brief though it had been, Tom had swept over the ground.

The man's eagerness to get at Dancing Feather blinded him to his own danger.

He had urged his horse forward, and his bright *machete* was already gleaming in the first rays of the rising sun.

At this moment, however, Tucson Tom fired.

Three shots he sent with such lightning rapidity that it seemed as though it was one continuous discharge.

They sounded the death-knell of the wretch.

He fell over the side of his horse, but his huge Mexican spur becoming entangled in the stirrup, he was dragged along at the steed's heels.

The animal, alarmed at such a strange burden, started off at a wild pace with the body dangling at its heels.

Fit fate for such a dastard soul.

Again had the valiant Texan emerged victorious from the terrible strait into which he had been thrown by circumstances.

Dancing Feather received him with outstretched hand, and a look of pride on her face that went direct to Tom's heart.

Though brought up by the white wife of an Apache chief, and taught English and Spanish, she had necessarily imbibed some of the best of Indian traits.

Among others was an admiration for bravery, and surely she had already seen this trait developed so strongly in the character of Tucson Tom as to confirm every trust she had reposed in him.

The Border Tiger, standing at the edge of the timber, saw that as far as the possession or death of the young girl was concerned his present mission was a failure.

He ground his teeth furiously.

There were still men left to him, enough to make a quartette.

The wounded could be sent away to a den

in the mountains, and with the others he might yet accomplish something.

The Texan turned.

Seeing General Cortina in sight he took off his sombrero and waved it in the air.

The Mexican waved his in return, looking on the act as one of bravado, and in which he did not wish to be left out.

Then Tom and the young girl turned their horses' heads, riding away toward the east.

There was no pursuit made, so far as could be seen.

The enemy had already been punished too severely, and did not care for any more of the same sort.

In the success that had accompanied his work the Texan had reason to feel pleased, for in spite of the dark prospect that at times had seemed to have no silver lining, things had happened for the best.

Although the arrival of the desperadoes had seemed disastrous, considering the strange mission that had brought them to the wilderness, yet it has been seen that their presence had aided him in no little degree in effecting the release of Dancing Feather in the first place, and as he was bound to have a fight with one crowd or the other, as well the desperadoes as the gang of wild Apaches.

The horse which the young girl had been riding at the time she was swept from its back by the powerful arm of an Apache brave was found just where Tom had staked it.

This time an extra animal was taken as a reserve, for they had in mind the accident that had happened whereby Mabel's steed was thrown out of the race.

The timber was soon lost sight of and they continued to ride forward.

Of their recent adventures no trace had been left, and no harm done save that Tucson Tom had now but one revolver.

That weapon was ever ready, however, and would no doubt serve him in case of need.

CHAPTER XXI.

HUNTER AND HUNTED.

THE fugitives rode steadily onward through the whole of the day.

They did not try to make fast time.

Better than that was the fact that their horses remained in good trim.

At no time during the day were the animals not equal to a spurt, if such a thing were rendered necessary.

When the day-kings declined in the direction of the west, Tucson Tom drew in Buckskin and declared that they had reached a good place for a camp.

The situation was rather peculiar, being a wooded ridge that ran across the plain like a great mole-hill.

They had climbed upward and reached a point near the top.

Here Tom dismounted and fastened their animals to a tree.

Leaving Dancing Feather to watch them he made his way toward the top of the ridge.

It was only some twenty feet above.

The Texan had a double object in this move.

From this point of observation he could look back over their trail and see if they were pursued, while at the same time there would be spread out to him a view of the plain beyond.

Again, he felt sadly the need of fresh meat and cherished a hope that some chance might come up whereby he could obtain some.

When he reached the trees at the top of the ridge he found that he would have to move along a short space in order to get a good view of the ground over which they had so recently passed.

This was easily done.

Then he scanned the surface of the plain.

Here and there were small groups of antelopes browsing upon the herbage, and Tom could also see a drove of wild mustangs and a small herd of shaggy bison far away.

To the north the faint outlines of mountains were visible, while in the opposite direction he could see the line that marked the bad lands.

These took but a cursory glance.

Then his eye followed their route, which he was enabled to do from several things he remembered to have noticed.

Miles away, at the point where the plain and sky seemed to meet he saw a moving speck which riveted his attention.

He found it utterly out of the question to decide whether this was made up of buffaloes, antelopes, or mustangs with desperado riders.

If the latter, then the hour or more that would intervene before the coming of darkness might bring them much closer to the ridge.

The Texan now turned his attention to the prospect beyond his point of observation, and mentally mapped out his course.

Then his eye was caught by moving objects below.

He saw a small herd of antelopes feeding upon the plain.

How his eye kindled at the sight.

The wind was favorable, blowing from the southeast, and he determined to have a try at them, with some prospect of success.

There was more than one thing which gave him reason to hope.

His revolver was deadly in his hand even at long range, and he had hunted these fleet racers of the prairie too often not to know all the tricks of the trade.

Carefully he made his way down the side of the hill.

He finally found himself ensconced in a little patch of bushes somewhat isolated from the rest.

The animals were drifting away and even then they were far beyond range.

This did not worry the ranger.

Complacently he proceeded to fasten to the end of a stick some five feet long, which he had picked up and carried with him, a red silk handkerchief.

When this had been done, he raised it above the bushes and waved it gently to and fro.

It had an immediate effect.

One of the antelopes caught sight of it, and the whole herd instantly took the alarm.

Tucson Tom quietly thrust the lower end of the stick into the soil.

The breeze kept the red handkerchief moving, and this answered his purpose admirably.

His faith in the curiosity of the animals was not at all misplaced.

They went only a little distance, and then turning, surveyed the flaunting handkerchief.

Then they advanced, every now and then retreating a little, only to come on further again.

Tucson Tom was biding his time.

He crouched there all in readiness for the finale of the strange scene.

The animals were now near enough, and as he had selected a victim he let drive.

True to his aim flew the bullet winged with death, and the balance of the herd flew off like the wind as the hunter arose from his place of ambush.

He might have killed the whole of them had he so desired, for antelopes do not always run at the report of a gun, unless they see the figure of a human being, which they recognize as a mortal foe.

One was all he desired, however.

As he was busily engaged in cutting off the choice portions, his mind fixed upon matters connected with his present adventure, he was amazed to receive a sudden severe tap upon the shoulder, that came near breaking it, and knocked the knife from his grasp.

At the same instant there sounded in his ear a deep, hoarse growl.

The Texan ranger had roamed the wild Southwest for too many years not to know what that signified.

He made a sudden spasmodic leap, in which both hands and feet served as a propelling power.

Nothing else could have saved him, and once in the grasp of the enemy that had come upon him thus suddenly, his chances would have been slight indeed.

Turning after making that wonderful, frog-like leap, he found himself face to face with an enormous grizzly.

The animal growled again, showing his teeth, and made as if about to rush upon him.

"See here, old fellow, I don't mind dividing with you. Let me take away what I've cut off, and you're welcome to the balance."

The old grizzly did not look at it in that light, though.

Possibly he believed that "to the victor belong the spoils."

Again, the very parts Tom would have carried away might have been his particular favorites.

At any rate he manifested his intention not only of possessing all the antelope, but also adding the ranger's body to his larder as a tid-bit.

Tom saw that there was no escaping a battle.

As he knew the advantage of keeping the fierce monster at a distance, he whipped out his ever ready revolver and proceeded to plant several balls in that portion of the brute's corporosity where they would do the greatest amount of good.

Lead and powder wield a mighty power when directed by a master mind, and surely the Texan ranger was at home in their use.

The huge animal made a rush forward, but as one of the bullets had blinded him, the ranger had little difficulty in avoiding his intended embrace.

Another shot!

This touched his heart, and he fell wallowing upon the ground, soon stiffening out in death.

It needs a cool head, a steady hand and a quick eye to come out first best in a struggle with a grizzly bear.

Many a hunter of long experience has met his fate in the awful claws of one of these monster devils, known in California as "Mountain Charlies."

Tom put his foot on the great brute, and looked down upon him with no little satisfaction as he reloaded his revolver.

Just then he made a startling discovery.

One cartridge alone remained in his pouch, and when this was placed in the cylinder, he had but three shots in all.

He felt a shadow come over his mind, but throwing it off, he was about to return to his fair companion when struck by an idea, he cut off the claws from one foot of the bear he had just slain.

The Indians wear such as trophies, of which they may well feel proud.

As Mabel had been brought up among the Apaches, she would perhaps appreciate the sight of those horrible claws.

Then, with his venison, he retraced his way up the hill.

Two-thirds of the way up he halted at a particular point, and hung the fresh meat upon the branch of a tree.

This was to be their camp.

A spring of fresh water was near by, and there was a fine opportunity for a fire, as plenty of dry wood lay around.

In a few minutes he was once more at the side of Dancing Feather.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FIRE-TRAILERS.

SHE was exceedingly glad to see him back again safe and sound.

The fact of his firing four shots had aroused her fears, but he had told her not to move from the spot, and so she did not.

They led the horses to the other slope of the peculiar ridge.

Here, at the place Tom had picked out, they halted, and the animals were staked as best as could be done under the circumstances.

Then the ranger proceeded to start a fire.

To avoid making a smoke that could be seen in the daytime, he selected wood that was exceedingly dry.

When this was well under way, he left to the young girl the task of cooking the venison—a thing she insisted on—and made his way up to the top of the ridge to take an observation.

It was now not far from dusk.

The ranger's eyes went at once to the far horizon, where he had seen that moving object.

It was no longer there.

Then it must have been some stray wild animals that had gone off in another direction, or else were at this time lying down.

Stay! what was that?

Much closer, but a few miles away in fact, and overlooked in his first survey, was a small party of horsemen.

Tucson Tom uttered a low exclamation at sight of them.

"Cortina and what is left of his band. They have not had enough yet," he muttered between his teeth.

It could be no other.

One seemed to be riding in the advance as though following the trail of the fugitives.

At that distance it was hard to count them, but the Texan did not believe there were more than five, all told, in the party.

Five desperadoes and three shots in his revolver.

That was not very promising.

He watched them for some little time and at last saw them stop as though they believed the fugitives had halted somewhere about the ridge and they did not want to draw too near so as to discover their presence to those they hunted.

This was enough.

As he turned away he heard the soft, silvery voice of the young girl calling:

"Tom! supper!"

The words somehow electrified him.

"Some day, please Heaven, she shall call me thus to my meals, if I can ever be worthy of her pure love," he muttered.

The prospect was full of a subtle charm and it was with this strange ecstasy in his breast that he walked down to where the little camp had been pitched.

It would hardly do to say that venison was cooked beyond all precedent, for the appliances were of the rudest order, but Tucson Tom was ready to swear it was the sweetest morsel he had ever put in his mouth.

Under the circumstances he was possibly excusable, and so long as he was happy to believe thus, whose business was it to object?

When darkness had come the fire had died out completely.

This was according to Tom's desire, for it would be very apt to betray them.

He saw that Dancing Feather was comfortably fixed for a good sleep, and the horses in such position that all that was necessary for rapid flight was for them to spring upon the backs of the animals.

Before leaving the girl he told her that in all probability their flight would be resumed during the night, and she must be ready when he awoke her.

As for himself he could have resumed the wild ride at once, but consideration for his gentle companion, unused to such exposure, and a desire to give the animals a rest, combined to form his present plan.

He would remain here some hours, as long as was possible, and then start on, giving Mabel as much of a rest as he could.

The brave girl would have insisted on going forward had she known that the halt was called principally on her account.

This was why Tucson Tom said nothing about the matter.

He took up his post on the summit of the ridge and settled himself comfortably for a short nap.

An hour's sleep would refresh him in a wonderful degree, and he felt sure his foes could not get very close in that time.

As he possessed the happy faculty of waking up at any set time there was no danger of his sleeping too long.

Sure enough, about an hour later he raised his head.

In all that time there had been no more signs of life about him beyond his regular breathing than one would find in a log.

Taking an observation he found that all was well, the position of the heavenly bodies telling him that he had not allowed himself too much time for sleep.

He looked out upon the plain.

All was wrapped in darkness.

His attention was immediately called however, to a certain spot where a light seemed to be moving over the plain.

It was approaching the ridge.

If Tucson Tom was puzzled at first to know what it was, this feeling soon gave way to one of comprehension.

There was nothing mysterious about that moving light, for it was held in the hand of a desperado.

At times the Texan could even catch a glimpse of the face back of it.

The man was on foot.

He bent low down and flashed the torch so that it lighted up the ground.

Once or twice it kindled an embryo conflagration in the dried grass, but each time this was promptly squelched by the ready foot of the man who carried the torch.

The man was a trailer.

He was tracking the fugitives by torchlight and in a fair way to lead his comrades to the little camp.

If those they sought could be taken unawares then the chances of accomplishing that which had brought them out were so much the better.

Tucson Tom sat there and watched them drawing closer and closer.

He gloried in the consciousness that the young girl was recovering her strength in a refreshing sleep, while the horses when wanted, would be in prime condition.

Let the hounds come.

They sought his life—and hers.

The man who would harm that sweet girl must be a fiend incarnate, but money had bought these fellows' souls.

Well, he had defied and defeated them once before, and if necessary stood ready to deliver them a second lesson.

"Yes, let them come!"

They moved steadily along, and the Texan sat there watching their progress.

He had calculated that it would take them an hour at least to reach the base of the ridge, and in this shrewd guess he was right as usual.

When they grew nearer he could begin to catch glimpses of the others who came behind the torch-bearer, mounted on mustangs.

It was too far for him to make certain but he believed the man just in the rear of the trailer to be General Cortina.

It was now time for him to be moving.

The Mexicans were at the base of the ridge and each man seemed to be procuring a torch, fearful lest they should stumble into some pitfall or a trap set by their wily foe.

This was a very foolish piece of business did they but know it.

The torches did them little or no good and a great deal of harm, as it betrayed their presence to those who might be watching.

As he halted to throw away the three precious shots that remained in his revolver Tucson Tom had bethought himself of another plan by means of which the same result might be accomplished, and his ammunition saved in part.

If the trailers followed the course our friends had taken they must make use of a little gorge that had an upward incline.

To this point Tom now slipped, with that readiness which proclaimed that his mind had been already made up.

He was not long in finding that for which he sought, and by this time the desperadoes were coming in line up the gulch.

It was a singular procession that met the eyes of the Texan as he looked down over the edge of the rock on which he lay.

Five men on foot were there, spread out in single file, each one carrying a lighted torch held above his head.

Though the spectacle appeared serious enough in all conscience, Tucson Tom actually chuckled at it as though he knew what he held in his hand, and that the game was his.

They had left their horses behind them and intended closing in upon the camp of the fugitives on foot, hoping thus to catch them napping.

That was a second time they counted without their host—Tucson Tom!

CHAPTER XXIII.

A RED HORSE-THIEF.

ONWARD came the five torch-bearers.

Looking down upon them from his position on the rocks, Tom saw a weird spectacle, and one that would remain in his memory for many a day.

The ascent was quite steep, and the little gully exceedingly narrow.

Sure-footed horses could climb it—those of the fugitives had already done so, but these men of blood preferred to go about their work on foot, for reasons that were plainly manifest, and which have already been stated.

Tucson Tom smiled grimly as he looked upon his enemies.

He felt that he had them at his mercy.

At his side was a little pile of stones, large and small, and these he meant to turn loose upon them when the proper time came.

If this would not be sufficient to stop them he knew of other means.

The flight could be resumed when once these bloodhounds of the border had been hurled back.

Slowly the seconds passed.

They were now almost within range.

At this point they seemed to cluster as if for a hasty consultation, and Tom was quick to see his opportunity.

There was a sudden movement of his arm.

Over went the pile of rocks.

From below there suddenly came a wild yell of dismay, and the torches were hastily extinguished either through accident or design, the man above did not care to investigate which.

His object had been accomplished.

Flight was now the order of the hour.

The scoundrels had probably been considerably bruised by the fall of stone, but he had no idea of exterminating them.

By some other means they would succeed in reaching the top of the ridge, but by this time Tom and his fair charge would be riding over the dark plain.

He hurried back to the little camp.

Dancing Feather was awake and waiting anxiously to see him.

She had heard the yells of the desperadoes, and wondered how Tom was dealing with them.

Together they led the horses down the slope, in a path Tom had previously marked out for such use, and finally they reached the level land at the base of the ridge.

Here they mounted.

When they were riding safely away the Texan could not but feel relieved, not that he had at any time feared for his own safety, but knowing the desperate resolve of the desperadoes, he had been a trifle afraid lest one of them should slip across the ridge in time to waylay them, and sending a shot into their midst, sent at random, possibly strike the young girl he loved.

True, if such a thing had happened he might have remained in the neighborhood until he had avenged her death by exterminating the last one of the bandits, but that would be poor consolation, and hence he was glad to get away without running such risks.

Presently cries of rage from the top of the ridge announced the fact that Cortina and his followers had reached the top of the ridge.

They fired several shots, but it was only an exhibition of spite, for there was not one chance in a thousand of their striking anything.

The fugitives rode on.

As Tom had marked out his course he was able to follow pretty close upon the line, even in the gloom of night.

He related to his fair companion what he had done as they rode along.

After two hours riding they reached a little grove of trees.

Here they drew rein again.

A second camp was formed and Tucson Tom yielded to slumber.

While Buckskin was near by he had little fear of being taken by surprise.

Still every half hour or so he would raise his head and listen intently.

The balance of the night passed away with out any further alarm.

If Cortina and his men had not entirely given up the idea of following them, they meant to do so more at their leisure, trusting to some accident to throw the fugitives into their power.

In the morning the Texan started another small fire, and they were able to indulge in a second meal of cooked venison.

Then they resumed their journey.

Nothing was seen of the pursuers either red or white, during the day.

Tucson Tom had reason to congratulate himself on the success attained in thus eluding his foes and gaining such a long start.

Should this good luck continue for a couple of days he would reach his destination—Tucson.

He had changed his course now and was now heading toward the South.

That night they camped in the dry bed of an olden stream.

The *barranca* was not unlike that where we first found them, and Tom had no idea that they would have trouble here.

Such was a fact however.

He was awakened in the middle of the night by a note of warning from Buckskin and knew that the faithful horse had scented danger.

All was darkness around him.

He heard the regular breathing of the young girl near him, and this reassured him, for his first thought was of her.

After listening for a moment he became convinced that some one was near the horses, which would account for Buckskin's actions.

There was a chance that it might prove to be a hungry wolf.

Tucson Tom believed, however, that in all likelihood it would turn out to be a prowling Indian.

He crept cautiously toward the spot.

Every sense was on the alert, for danger of this kind was not to be trifled with.

Buckskin continued to give an occasional snort which proved to his master that the danger was by no means past.

Tom held a bowie in his hand and was fully determined to use it if the occasion offered, for although the prowling party had only designs upon their horses, if they lost there it would be next to impossible to make any headway toward Tucson.

He was now close to the animals.

The darkness in the *barranca* was intense and while it seemed to baffle his purpose to some extent, at the same time it served him for the prowling foe could not see to determine his whereabouts.

Tom now listened intently.

As the horses were for the moment quiet he could catch the least sound, and presently he was ready to swear he had heard a rustling movement.

Still he remained as immovable as the rock around him.

Was it an Indian?

If so were there more than one?

These were questions of grave importance to the ranger.

From the place where he crouched he could just get a glimpse of Buckskin's outlines.

He wondered why the animal stood with his head lowered, and no longer gave token of his displeasure by those snorts.

The truth was suddenly made manifest.

There came to his ears a dull sound.

At the same time he saw the animal rear up his hind-quarters.

The truth struck home.

Buckskin had waited until he knew the sulking red-skin was within range, and had then let fly.

Tom made an examination.

He found a dead Indian there, one of the horse's hoofs having smashed his skull.

There was no further alarm.

As the night was already well spent, the ranger concluded to remain awake, and keep watch and ward over his companion.

Morning dawned at last.

He said nothing of the night's catastrophe to Dancing Feather, having with the first gray streaks of dawn removed the body of the dead Indian to some distance.

In doing this he made a discovery.

The red-skin was not an Apache but of the Navajo tribe.

What he had been doing alone in this region it would be hard to say, unless he were a spy, but seeing the two fugitives' camp, an unconquerable desire to possess the yellow horse must have seized upon him.

It had led him to his death.

Again the two fugitives started out upon their day's journey.

They met with no misfortune during the twelve hours they were moving.

When night came, Tom declared that if all went well they should be in Tucson at the close of another day.

What his plans were then, he did not say, but possibly there was a part of the drama to be played in this border town, and he meant to see it through.

The peril of the plains was not all that he had to face for her sake—there were also enemies nearer home.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TUCSON TOM PLAYS THE SPY.

Tucson was more of a Mexican town than American before the Southern Pacific Railroad ran through it, and even to-day there are as many Greasers embraced in its population as all others combined.

There are to be found there the outcasts of all countries, desperadoes who have been hunted from the States by the stern arm of the law, and who make Tucson their headquarters.

Among them wander hunters and trappers, miners and cowboys.

The stern majesty of the law is unknown, and the revolver takes the place of it.

That weapon is all-powerful.

The man who can draw the quickest is the most respected citizen.

In the early days of which I write, the town of Tucson was a den of iniquity, with few good traits.

Just as the shades of evening were drawing over the plain and river, two parties rode into the place.

One of these consisted of two persons, and in these we recognize our friends Tucson Tom and Dancing Feather.

The other had five men in its ranks, men whose bandaged heads and arms proclaimed the fact of their having been in some sort of a scrimmage.

In the leader we recognize Cortina.

By making a bee-line for Tucson after his discomfiture on the ridge, the Mexican and his sadly demoralized company had been enabled to reach the place at the same time that the ranger did.

The gathering darkness hid each party, so that neither one knew of the other's arrival, and believed themselves to be the first to reach the border town.

Possibly there would be some surprise manifested when the truth became known.

Tom made direct for a little tavern with which he was acquainted.

It was kept by one Captain Sams, a '49er, who had several times found and lost a fortune in California, and finally drifted down to Arizona, married a buxom girl and set up in business.

His place was the most orderly in town, and that was why Tom preferred it.

The old captain was a man not to be trifled with, and the common riff-raff gave him a wide berth.

Tom knew he had several comfortable rooms in his old two-story adobe building, and it was now his intention to secure one of these for the benefit of Mabel; this done, he had business on hand.

Captain Sams and his wife greeted the young girl warmly, when they heard her story and what wonderful things Tom had done.

The old '49er winced at the mention of Cortina's name, for the Border Tiger was feared by all the honest men on the frontier.

When he had seen Mabel comfortable—and even the rude fixtures of the tavern were somewhat strange to her so that they had to be explained by the landlord's good wife—Tom went out.

His first care was to procure another revolver and a supply of ammunition, for to secure respect in this wild Arizona town, a man required to be well "heeled," and to carry his weapons in full view.

The streets were dark, save in places where a light flashed upon them.

Now and then some Mexican resident could be met, preceded by a boy bearing aloft a flambeau, and accompanied by two stout men-servants with cudgels.

No man who had respect for his life was to be found in the streets of Tucson after dark without arms or a guard.

This did not speak very well for the town, but Judge Lynch had been known to appear here several times, and this was a hopeful sign.

Tom twice halted to watch one of these singular processions go by.

The second time, happening to glance up at the house opposite, he gave a start.

"That is the face, as sure as fate! If I would know more of my Mabel's history, I must enter that house to-night!" he muttered.

The face he had seen was that of a woman, and his words told that this was not the first time it had fallen under his observation.

After the Mexican Don and his squad had passed by, he set about examining the building, in the balcony window of which he had caught a glimpse of that face.

Few houses in Tucson had a second story.

Most were built after the regular Mexican style, with a flat roof which would serve the purpose of a promenade.

But this one had a second story—a low affair, with a balcony above and below.

On one side was a high wall, doubtless inclosing a garden.

Not a light was to be seen about the house.

Tom was determined to have an interview, if possible, with the owner of that face, and unravel more of the mystery connected with the young girl he had rescued from the Apaches and whom Cortina and his gang of ruffians had been well paid to murder.

He was not entirely in the dark with reference to the facts of the case, but what little he knew only whetted his appetite for more, and he was now determined to prosecute his purpose while he had the chance.

Having surveyed the building, he proceeded to climb upon the lower balcony.

From this he found that it would be comparatively easy to reach the upper one by means of the heavy vines that grew close to the house.

The task proved as easy of accomplishment as he had anticipated, and it was not long before he was hidden among the vines of the upper balcony.

So adroitly had he done this work, that any person in the room would not have heard him.

Hardly had he ensconced himself in this position than he heard heavy steps below.

To his surprise, they halted directly beneath him and there followed a rap on the door.

Tom knew there were at least half a dozen men in the party, and his first thought was that their presence had some connection with his visit.

Reflection told him that this could hardly be.

His presence in town was unknown.

A figure glided out upon the balcony, and even in the darkness Tom could see it was the owner of the marked face.

He bent over and looked down.

One of those below was puffing a cigarette and this he drew upon in so lively a manner that his face must have been disclosed.

"*Quien es* (who is it)?" asked the woman.

The man laughed as he looked up.

Tom was not in position to see his face, but he seemed to have an idea that he had heard that laugh before.

The woman recognized him now.

"Ribaldo! you have returned! Good! have your men enter below and I will place food before them. Do you ascend and make your report to me."

She re-entered the room.

Tom heard movements in the house and presently those below were admitted.

Then a light was struck in the room and he saw the woman plainly.

She was of Spanish blood and had once been uncommonly fair, but time had marred her beauty and there could be seen upon her face a tigerish look that was a true index to her disposition.

He knew at once that his suspicion had been correct, for this was the woman whom he understood to have connived at the death of Mabel.

In her hands, therefore, rested the secret of the girl's life.

She lighted an antique lamp in which the wick seemed to float in a cup of thick oil.

The room was more of a sitting apartment than anything else, and for a Mexican house, was luxuriously fitted up, showing that the woman was possessed of wealth.

Tom just barely noted this fact.

His mind was taken up with wondering who Ribaldo might be.

Perhaps a suspicion had entered his mind.

If so he would not long be kept in suspense.

Heavy footfalls sounded on the stairs.

The Spanish lady had just time to throw herself into an easy-chair and assume an attitude that would become her, when the curtain was pushed aside to give entrance to a man.

The spy on the upper balcony started.

He had no trouble in recognizing this worthy.

Before him he saw the terror of the border,

the man whom he had last seen in the little gulch when he showered rocks upon him and his followers—General Cortina.

To this woman he was Ribaldo.

His face had upon it several cuts not yet healed, and his arm was bandaged tightly, although he could use it.

Strange indeed must have been the sensations of the ranger while thus gazing upon the man whose name was such a terror along the Rio Colorado and the Del Norte, realizing as he did that the wounds Cortina bore had been inflicted with his own hand.

He saw in this peculiar meeting the hand of Providence, whereby he might accomplish his ends without proceeding to that extreme he had before deemed necessary—the threatening of this woman with evil unless she made a confession.

CHAPTER XXV.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

CORTINA's followers below were being served by a waiting maid, and their laughter and jests were to be heard from time to time.

Tom paid no attention to them at first, but in the end he was brought in an unpleasant way to realize their presence.

Of that more anon.

When Cortina entered he bowed.

Rough as he could appear among his followers, he had some of the instincts of a gentleman, and could show it in the company of the gentler sex when it suited his purpose.

They spoke in Mexican, but Tucson Tom was perfectly at home in that tongue, and had no difficulty in following out their conversation.

"When did you arrive, senor?"

"An hour ago."

"You return sooner than you expected."

"Yes; we did not think to be here for another week or so."

"What is the reason of this?"

"Our plans were changed by circumstances."

"You have not been in the Apache town?"

"No, senorita."

"Then you have not seen *her*."

The general laughed.

"If by *her* you mean Dancing Feather, the Priestess of the Sun, worshiped by the Apaches as one sacred, I can say that we have seen a little too much of her for our good."

"Say you so, Ribaldo? Haste and tell me what you mean."

The woman's eyes flashed with the glow one sees in the depths of a volcano, and she trembled as the earth might tremble when those awful fires are kept from bursting forth.

"The girl is no longer in the Apache town."

"Ha! where then, senor?"

"Close to this town."

"Those were not my orders, Ribaldo. The reward is to be paid for proofs of her death, not for a prisoner. You have not done well."

"*Carramba!* fair senorita, I acknowledge that I have not even a prisoner. The girl comes here in the charge of one who is not even a member of my band, but a deadly foe."

"What! dare you acknowledge that the great and only Cortina was defeated in his purpose by one man, and that too when he had his own crowd of lusty fellows at his back!"

"It is the truth, nevertheless."

"Did you fight at all?"

"Senorita, I have left four dead men on the plain, and all the others came back more or less wounded. Look at me! Am I not a beauty to break a woman's heart? I tell you we had a devil to deal with. For once Cortina acknowledges himself beaten, but it will not be for long. That man must die."

"Who was this wonderful bravo before whom an army could not stand?" she asked with contempt in her voice.

"Senorita, do you remember our last interview at the well on the border of the town?"

She nodded her head.

"Why should I forget, Ribaldo?"

"As we came away we met one who looked hard at us in the moonlight. I asked you who he was, and you replied Tucson Tom."

"I remember."

"His revolver it was that sent the bullet through this arm of mine. Tucson Tom heard more than we bargained for. He had seen Dancing Feather before, and was beloved of her, so that when he learned of my mission to Apache land, he hurried ahead. When I met him he had baffled the whole tribe, had slain many of their warriors, and, *carrajo!* when I come to think of it, I am astonished to still find myself in the land of the living."

The woman seemed to be thinking.

"Tucson Tom of all others. That accounts for it," she murmured.

"Accounts for what, senorita?"

"They are here in Tucson."

"How do you know that?"

"I suspected that this man was watching me for a purpose, and I instructed one of my men, Querdo by name, to follow him whenever he found an opportunity. Not more than half an hour ago he came to me and reported that this dashing ranger was in Tucson—that he had seen him enter, mounted on his yellow horse and accompanied by an Indian girl. The truth never entered my head until now."

"Where did they go, senorita?" he asked, eagerly.

"To the place of Captain Sams."

"Good!" he said, rubbing his hands.

"What would you do, Ribaldo?"

"Put them both out of the way before the rising of another sun."

"That must not be. I hired you to relieve me of all danger that might come to me through the Apache Priestess of the Sun."

"And that contract I mean to faithfully perform as agreed upon. The other part is a little piece of private business. My wounds will rest easier when that devil of a ranger is dead."

"But you must not kill him."

The resolution in her voice caused him to look at her with surprise.

Then his brow was elevated as he began to comprehend the truth.

"Ah! senorita, I am sorry you have allowed yourself to be smitten by the dashing face of Tucson Tom, for he has run across my path, and no man can do that and live."

"I pay you well for the task I set you, do I not, Ribaldo?"

"Admirably, senorita."

"Then I offer you the same number of golden onzas to spare the life of Tucson Tom."

The general hesitated.

Imagine the peculiar feeling of the man hidden among the vines of the balcony.

He experienced no pleasure at the manifestation of this passion, only revulsion.

Somehow the difference between this murderous plotter and his fair Mabel was so great that affection from the former seemed such as one might expect from a poisonous serpent, ready at the slightest provocation to plunge its fangs into the heart of the object of its regard.

To incite the heart of this woman to passion was as unfortunate a thing as a man could well do.

Cortina finally looked up.

"I will not promise you, senorita, but will keep your words in mind, and if I can subdue my feelings when I have a chance at Tucson Tom, with the memory of the gold boys, he may live."

"But you will not neglect your other work. It is dangerous to me to leave that girl here in civilization. Had I never said anything about it, she might not have been discovered, but, knowing the truth I could take no rest night or day while she lived. My fears have only aggravated the evil."

"Never fear. She shall not trouble you more. One question, senorita. To put her out of the way it may be necessary to walk over the body of Tucson Tom."

"Then walk over it. My first duty is to secure my own safety."

"That's business, senorita. One thing I have learned since entering the town this night. There is one here whom you would not have this girl meet for a fortune."

"You startle me, Ribaldo."

"It is Francisco!"

The name caused the blood to leave her face, and her hand trembled as it fell upon the sleeve of the general.

"Where did you see him?"

"In the place of Jose Gonzales. He knows me, but we have never been friends."

"Do you think the old snake-charmer would recognize the girl if he saw her?" she asked.

"It is more than likely. He is a wonderful man, and his eyes are like those of a rat. It would be a serious matter for you if the snake-charmer should see her."

"Then you must lose no time, Ribaldo. Haste to your work. Is your knife keen? Have you men you can rely on? Would that the chance were given me to make one sweep at the heart of this girl who had refused to die in the past when her time had come. I would glory in my stroke! What business has she in living when every one has long since believed her dead?"

"Vaya! possibly it is more her misfortune than her fault. Hark! my men are becoming impatient to move. I hear them at the door below. Sorry am I not to be able to present a better report, but you will hear from me by morning. This is not the end."

"I trust you to redeem your failure. Do not forget, Ribaldo, that you swore to accomplish this thing, and whatever else General Cortina may do he never breaks his word."

The Border Tiger bowed and smiled.

"Look for me by morning, senorita. Are these vines on the balcony strong?"

"They will bear your weight, senor."

"Then I shall swing myself down as mayhap a lover might. Buenas noches, senorita."

He stepped upon the balcony.

Tom could only hope for the best.

That this hope was not to be realized the event that speedily followed proved.

Cortina swept aside the vines as he was about to swing himself over the balcony, and in doing so found himself face to face with his inveterate enemy, Tucson Tom.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A LEAP FROM THE AZOTEA.

It would be difficult to express greater astonishment than that experienced by the great border desperado, Cortina, when he thus found himself confronting Tom upon the upper balcony of the mysterious senorita's house.

He was for the time being paralyzed.

Not so the ranger.

He realized that his position was far from being so pleasant as it might be, and that immediate action was necessary in order to take him out of the predicament.

His right arm shot out straight from the shoulder, and the clinched fist struck the doughty Mexican *contrabandista* square in the face.

He staggered back.

At the same time a cry pealed from his lips that was echoed by his men below.

Tom had seized hold of the vines to swing himself down, when that cry warned him of the danger to be met.

Changing his mind instantly he began to pull himself upward, and in five seconds his hands had caught the edge of the *azotea*.

Five seconds more and he had pulled himself over the line of the roof.

Even as he disappeared from view there sounded the report of a pistol, coming from the upper balcony.

Cortina had fired too late, however, and none knew this better than himself, as his yells to his men announced.

Several of them came up to his side and mounted to the roof like tigers.

Others stood below or ran around the wall of the garden, hoping to get a shot at the daring intruder with their *escopetas*, while he was still upon the roof, and outlined in silhouette against the star-decked sky.

When Tom crawled upon the roof, his first act was to run to the other side.

Here he could not be seen by any one from the street.

There was a means of reaching the roof from the interior of the house, and he could already hear one or more of the general's followers rattling up the stairs in their endeavor to reach this opening so common to every house in the Southwest, where the roof is in daily common use, and often made a garden of.

Tom knew that to avoid an encounter he must leave the roof in a hurry.

He had just decided upon his course when a head appeared in view at the point where

the balcony was situated, and the crash of feet on the upper stair told that another of his foes was close at hand.

In that rapid calculation he had made up his mind that the *azotea* was some fifteen feet or more from the ground.

That was not a great distance to fall, providing he had daylight to see where he was going.

As there was no alternative, he bent down, placed one hand on the coping of the roof, and then sprung outward.

A great crash of glass followed.

The man who was running across the roof in the hope of getting a shot at the hunted ranger inadvertently stepped upon what was apparently a skylight, and vanished.

Tom landed upon the soft earth in the midst of a flower-bed.

Luckily he was not injured a particle, and ready to continue his flight.

Around him were orange and lemon trees, and the air was fragrant with the odor of innumerable tropical flowers.

But these things had no beauty for him now.

He was being hunted for his life, and while not fearing Cortina and his men any more in the town of Tucson than when he so boldly faced the whole crew in the timber a few days previously, for reasons of his own he did not wish to become engaged in a melee with the fellows at this time and place.

He had a duty to perform, and he had promised Mabel that henceforth, for her sake, he would run no unnecessary risks.

Not that the ranger could ever be anything but the brave man he had always proved himself in the past, but there were times when he had been wont to expose himself to needless risks.

This promise was one of the things that kept him from facing the motley gang of Cortina, and braving them to their teeth.

Gaining his feet he started across the garden, intending to climb the wall and escape.

The vegetation grew so rank, and the darkness was so intense, that his progress was not as satisfactory as he might have desired.

Indeed, before he came in contact with the wall, he heard some of his foes in the garden and heard the wicked thrusts they were making with sabers and *machetes* in the bushes, hoping to prod the object of their search.

Then, too, a light appeared upon the scene, being a lantern held by the senorita herself, who had a cocked pistol in her other hand, and evidently meant to use it should the occasion present itself.

It was at this moment that Tom saw the outline of the wall loom up before him.

He had reached the end of the garden.

The wall was higher than he could reach, and, as the only means of gaining the top, he made use of a small tree that grew close by.

Lying extended along the coping of the adobe wall, he surveyed both sides.

Those in the garden were pushing the search vigorously, having formed a line that gradually advanced across it in the direction the hunted man would be likely to take.

The Texan could well afford to laugh at their efforts in the position he now occupied for at the rate they were advancing it would take them five to ten minutes to reach the wall.

At any moment he was ready to let go his hold and drop to the ground outside.

Would he meet with any trouble here?

He turned his head as he asked this mental question.

It was instantly answered.

From out of the darkness there came a sudden flash that he knew full well.

This was followed by the roar of an *escopeta*.

Tucson Tom knew the bullet had struck the adobe wall only a few inches below his body for he felt the pieces fly upward.

He had no desire to be made a target for other marksmen who might also be in the vicinity to practice upon, and hence without delay he slipped over the edge of the wall, hung suspended for a few seconds and then dropped down.

He knew the man who had fired was close

at hand, but one enemy was not to deter him from his purpose.

This was to reach the side of Mabel as soon as possible, for he had heard that which told him her life was in danger, and that some dastardly attempt would be made upon it before the rising of the sun.

As he sprung away from the wall, excited voices were heard.

He saw before him a figure, and caught the gleam of a knife-blade.

Tucson Tom darted to one side as the fellow struck, and then gave him a blow under the ear that sent him whirling over and over until he finally fell.

The way was now clear.

Tucson Tom had defeated his foes by the use of strategy.

Those in the garden were howling like Turkish dervishes as they rushed toward the gate in the endeavor to get out.

Dogs in the neighborhood were barking, women screaming, and taken all in all it seemed as though pandemonium had broken loose.

Leaving them to discover the truth as best they might, the ranger ran down the street until he had gone some little distance from the scene when he slackened his pace.

He had reason to congratulate himself on the successful issue of his campaign, for the enemy had been thoroughly demoralized without himself receiving a scratch.

More than this—he had heard something of their plans regarding the girl he loved, and even a clew had fallen to him which he intended following.

Francisco the snake charmer must be seen without delay, and be influenced to tell what he knew of the mystery.

Those devils might take it into their power to put him out of the way, in order to silence his tongue, and Tucson Tom wished to warn him at least of his danger.

When the Texan reached the tavern of Captain Sams, he took the old '49er into his confidence and had him mount guard.

The old veteran swore he would puncture any one he saw prowling about the place, and feeling satisfied that he would make use of his heavy seven-shooter if there was occasion for it, Tucson Tom left the tavern.

He believed he had left an efficient guard behind him.

Had he known that danger from another source menaced his loved one possibly he would have left the snake-charmer to run his chances and have remained to guard Dancing Feather.

He knew where the gaming den mentioned by Cortina was situated, and in ten minutes he was moving among its *habitués* looking for his man.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SNAKE-CHARMER.

SUCH a scene as Tom now looked upon may be witnessed any night in a Mexican town of to-day, and at this period in the life of Tucson there were many more Mexicans numbered among its inhabitants than all other nations combined.

The dark-browed Greaser has a tremendous love for the excitement of gambling.

Men will stake everything they possess on the turn of fortune's wheel, even to their weapons, their horse, and even at times their wives, for in Mexico a wife is the *property* of her husband.

More than once a game has been carried out where the life of the defeated one was to be taken by the winner.

This novel method of dueling by chance has never become very popular, however, and it is only practiced among the most desperate classes, when two mortal foes meet at the gambling table.

The scene Tom gazed upon was no new one to him.

He was acquainted with all the phases of border life, and there was little with respect to Tucson and its habits that he did not know.

It was a stirring sight.

Some three or four dozen men were in the room, which was lighted by rude lamps.

The majority of those present were Mexicans, though there were some Gringos scattered among them.

Games of various kinds were in progress, though the one in most favor seemed to be monte, the national game of Mexico.

Among these devotees of fickle fortune the Texan sauntered.

He had never seen the snake-charmer, but he believed he could tell him.

Several things might guide him.

First of all the man was a Mexican, so that he could confine his search among that class.

Then again, as a snake-charmer he was apt to show some sign of his calling.

Tom looked around.

There was certainly no one present whose body was covered with the scaly reptiles, and if Francisco was there it was as one of the many wooers of the gentle goddess of luck, and not as a conjuror and magician.

Inside of a minute his attention became riveted upon a certain man.

He became possessed with the idea that this might be the party he sought, yet there was one thing that bothered him.

From what he had heard the rascally General Cortina say, while in conversation with the plotting woman, he had become possessed of the idea that the snake-charmer was an old man.

The party upon whom he now had his eye fixed was certainly not very old, though Tom was forced to admit that he could not have guessed within ten years of his age had he tried.

He desired to watch the man before committing himself.

It was not long before the Bowie Bravo became convinced of two facts.

The man was being haunted by a shadow, and he was conscious of the fact.

He was uneasy.

Moving from table to table he either watched the play or took a brief hand himself in the game, but always turning away with a frown on his face and a look over his shoulder toward the dark-browed Mexican who kept near him.

This latter Tom gauged at a glance.

He was a genuine desperado.

There could be no doubt but that he belonged to the gang of reckless devils controlled by the Tiger of the Border—Cortina.

If this were so, it proved the wisdom of Tom's act in seeking out the snake-charmer without delay.

He had not done this any too soon.

Already was the hired assassin on the ground.

Although Francisco had discovered that he was being dogged, he had no means of learning why this was so.

Tucson Tom only waited an opportunity to inform him respecting this.

Why the tool of Cortina dogged him so, was at first a puzzle to the Texan.

If the fellow meant to waylay him as he left the gambling den, why arouse his suspicions by this process of shadowing him?

Tom was forced to conclude that was not the method which the man intended taking.

He was waiting a chance to pick a quarrel with Francisco in the den itself, where undoubtedly he had friends.

This could be easily done.

Standing so close to the other as he sometimes did, there was a chance for the latter to step on his toes as he turned around.

This would be provocation enough, and *machete* or pistol would do the work.

More than one man had been killed in that very room on less provocation.

Tucson Tom somehow became decidedly interested in the peculiar game.

He studied the snake-charmer, and was rather drawn toward him, for although somewhat weird in his appearance, there was at least a brave and an honest expression on his face.

This man's life was too precious to be sacrificed by these plotting devils.

He knew that which the Texan would give much to know, and which in some way or other he was bound to learn—the connection between the fair god of the Apaches and the woman who had not been content that she should live in that far-away Indian country, but who had sent out trusted emissaries to take her life, no matter when and where they found her.

This secret he was bound to possess.

While the snake-charmer lived, there was a good chance for him to obtain possession of it.

Dead men tell no tales.

It was therefore greatly to the advantage

of the Texan that the evil designs of the plotters respecting the life of Francisco be defeated.

He had made up his mind that this must be so, and being a man of determination, he was apt to carry out his design if it lay in human power.

One thing surprised him a little.

The desperado seemed to pay no attention whatever to his presence.

Either he had no eyes for any one save the man he intended to destroy, or else he was unaware of the fact that Tucson Tom had learned this part of Cortina's secret.

This could be easily explained if it was taken for granted that the man had been set to watch the snake-charmer at the time the presence of Francisco was first discovered by Cortina, which, of course, was previous to his appearing with his desperadoes at the house where Tucson Tom was already hidden among the vines of the balcony.

At any rate, the Texan believed it would aid his plans.

He managed to keep close in the vicinity of the two men.

This was the shadow in turn shadowed.

Had the villain attempted to stab Francisco in the back, the Texan would have leaped upon him like a panther.

The game grew monotonous, when, finally, there was a slight change.

As though his work had made him dry, the Mexican suddenly glided over to the place where liquor was sold.

Tucson Tom saw his opportunity and was quick to embrace it.

He glided up to where the snake-charmer stood, and touched him on the shoulder.

The other turned like a flash.

"You are Francisco, the snake-charmer," said the Texan when he had looked the other in the eye without flinching.

He spoke in the Mexican tongue, with which he was perfectly familiar.

"Si, senor!" replied the other.

He had made no attempt to draw a weapon but Tucson Tom fancied he heard a sound like the hiss of an angry snake.

"Then you are in danger, senor," he said.

"Caspita! I know it."

"But you do not know who wishes your life."

"He is in the employ of General Cortina."

"Why should Cortina hate you? Have you ever offended him?"

"Never."

"Then you do not know why he has placed one of his hired assassins on your trail?"

"I confess my ignorance, senor, but you do not see me quail."

"No, you are a brave man, Francisco. I happen to know the reason why Cortina desires you put out of the way."

"It is a mystery to me, senor."

"You possess a secret."

"I, senor?"

"Yes, concerning one who was thought to be dead, a young girl who in her infancy was captured by the Apaches. He fears you may meet her and recognize her, for through my means she has been saved from the Indians and shall live to claim her own."

The snake-charmer became greatly excited.

His memory had been suddenly aroused and a scene long since shut away was now brought to the surface again.

"Senor, this is strange news you tell me. One alive who was long ago believed to be dead. Blessed Virgin! can my dream be about to come true? You say she is here, in this place. Lead me to her, senor, and let me learn if it can be so that Heaven has seen fit to bring the dead to life."

"All in good time, my friend, but first of all we must battle these hounds who seek your life. They must learn what it is to deal with Tucson Tom. Here comes the desperadoes again."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

STRUCK BY A LIVING THUNDERBOLT.

THERE was now a possibility of trouble.

The desperado having gained a little more nerve because of the liquor he had swallowed would no doubt attempt to carry out his design for the destruction of the snake-charmer.

His face showed this.

There was a glitter in his eyes that told the story, and Tom knew that the crisis could not be far off.

The man noticed his closeness to the other and he scowled in an ugly manner that tickled the ranger not a little.

Familiarity is very apt to breed contempt, and Tom's long acquaintance with this type of a border ruffian had made him indifferent with regard to them.

They could be dangerous, however, and a knife-thrust in the back was not a thing to be sneered at, no matter from whom it came.

The desperado pushed close up to where they stood and insolently surveyed Francisco.

All he wanted was a word from the other when he would have put his plan for murder into operation.

The snake-charmer however gave him back look for look but said not a word.

This appeared to enrage the other still more.

He muttered a curse.

Since the snake-charmer would not begin hostilities he must do so himself.

"Who are you looking at?" he demanded.

"A fool!" replied Francisco calmly.

"Meaning me?"

"Vaya! if the shoe fits, wear it," replied the other with the greatest nonchalance.

Tucson Tom again heard that hissing sound as though by some muttered word Francisco were rousing to action some reptile hidden about his clothing.

The desperado gave vent to a cry of rage, and snatching out his *cuchillo*—a short-bladed knife entirely dissimilar to the *machete*, which is a half-sword—he sprung toward his antagonist.

His intention was evident.

He meant to carry out the order of General Cortina to the letter.

That worthy had ordered him to put the magician out of the way, and now that the opportunity had come, he meant to do so.

Another person was to be consulted in the matter besides himself, and that was the snake-charmer.

Tom had been impressed with the confident manner in which the other had professed himself ready to take care of the man who sought his life, and although now willing to assist him, if necessary, he could not help but watch his movements with interest.

Francisco had stepped back a pace.

His hand had slipped beneath the jacket he wore, and to all appearances it seemed as though he were about to draw a weapon so as to meet his enemy on even ground.

Tom saw his hand come out.

It was raised above his head, and grasped some glittering object which could not be distinguished just then, owing to the rapid movements of the man and the smoky atmosphere of the long, low-ceiled apartment.

Whatever it was, Francisco seemed to cast it from him.

A cry of horror from the desperado now attracted all eyes toward him.

He had been in the act of rushing forward, but suddenly came to a stand-still.

Tom could not but shudder as his eyes fell upon the wretch, for he saw the man was doomed.

Around his neck was coiled a small snake that, with the rapidity of lightning, had buried its fangs in his throat.

There was no reprieve from that stroke.

The jugular vein was the place struck, and in this small reptile the ranger recognized the most deadly viper of Mexico—the adder.

Death must ensue almost instantly.

The stricken wretch seemed to realize this, for the shock had apparently taken away his strength, and he stood there shivering as though the chill of death were already upon him.

It was a terrible sight, and one the ranger was not likely to ever forget.

The *cuchillo* dropped from the man's hand to the deal floor with a clang, that sounded ghostly in the awful silence that had come upon the inmates of the gaming hell.

A wild cry now burst from the lips of the trembling man.

His hands clutched for support in a vague, uncertain way, that proclaimed a horrible truth.

The virulent poison, speeding through his veins, had already made him blind.

He reeled, and then fell with a crash.

Horrified eyes watched his writhing on the floor, and followed the serpent that, leaving his form, glided with crested head and defiant aspect over to where the snake-charmer stood.

No one attempted to bar its way; they even drew back shudderingly, and gave the terrible reptile room.

Francisco took it up, fondled its head for a few seconds, muttering some mysterious words, and then the deadly reptile coiled about his arm with its head raised above his hand.

No man would dare attempt lay a hand on him.

The stricken wretch upon the floor undoubtedly had friends present, but they did not seem anxious to avenge him.

They were not under orders as he had been, and besides, there was something about his fate that terrified them.

As for the snake-charmer, he glared about him as though looking for the next victim at whom to hurl his living boomerang.

They shrunk back before that glowering survey, each man feeling a chill as he fancied the slimy coils of the reptile about his neck, and its fangs piercing the flesh.

"Is there a friend of Cortina here?"

The voice of the snake-charmer rung out sharp and clear.

He waited for a reply, but none came.

In the face of the doom that had fallen upon the wretch who writhed upon the floor, there was not a man present who was brave enough to dare the vengeance of the magician by proclaiming himself a friend to the bandit.

The lip of the snake-charmer curled.

He knew it was fear that bound them, else every man present would have been glad to have acknowledged Cortina his friend.

"If Cortina were here he would be proud to learn he had such valiant friends. Hear me, men of Tucson. General Cortina has tried to murder me, and from this hour it must be war to the knife between us.

"You see here the coward he sent to put his *cuchillo* into my back. His fate shall be the doom visited upon any wretch who comes to find me in Cortina's name. Francisco, the snake-charmer and his pet Rango never sleep. If any man among you courts a death like that, let him bar my way now."

The magician was ready to leave now.

Tom was himself not averse to such an arrangement, not however because he had any fear of violence on the part of the desperadoes who were present, but on account of his young charge.

His mind was not quite easy with regard to Dancing Feather.

True, he had left her at the tavern, and in charge of the old '49er, whose sympathy was aroused, and who would risk everything for the young girl.

He had a cunning rascal to deal with in the Border Tiger, and Cortina might find it an easy task to overcome the innkeeper.

For this reason Tom was anxious to leave the place.

The men stared to see him accompany Francisco, for he was a well-known character in Tucson, and had gained the *sobriquet* of the Bowie Bravo among the Greasers by his proficiency with the keen blades he carried.

No one dared oppose their exit.

Heads were put together, however, and significant words exchanged.

Had it not been for the respect inspired by Francisco's terrible pet, and the well-known valor of Tom, these two men would never have left the place alive.

As it was, dark scowls followed them, and if no weapon was drawn it did not occur because the wish was not there.

The Texan was glad to leave the den behind him, with the revolting spectacle of the writhing figure on the floor.

He was all eagerness to bring Francisco face to face with the young girl.

Then the secret that had so long been locked up in the bosom of the snake-charmer and the plotting woman, would be made known.

The mystery of Dancing Feather would be a mystery no longer.

This made him anxious.

Perhaps there was some other reason for this state of feeling.

He may have had a premonition of coming evil, knowing as he did that Cortina was plotting to regain possession of the young girl, and conspiring with a view to her death.

At any rate, when they left the gaming-den, he hastened in the direction of the tavern, and the snake-charmer, as though realizing that something was ahead that would need his presence, followed in his footsteps.

There was indeed wisdom in this haste of the Texan ranger—more than he knew of, for Dancing Feather was in double peril.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE MAN ON THE LADDER.

CORTINA had lost no time in getting his men to work.

To this purpose he had devoted all of his energies, and had even condescended to lead the enterprise himself.

He knew who was opposed to them.

The man who had defied and defeated the Apaches of the mountains, and then came out first best in an encounter with his paid tools was not an antagonist to be despised, and he would need all the power he possessed in order to accomplish his end.

The words of the senorita regarding Tucson Tom had little weight with him.

If he saw fit to remove that worthy from his path he would not hesitate because she had given him to understand that if he could manage to murder the girl and spare the life of her champion, the reward he was to receive would be doubled.

When Tucson Tom left the tavern his form was seen by a spy.

This fact was reported to Cortina, who at once organized his force for the assault.

Like wolves half a dozen men crept up to the tavern through the darkness.

All was quiet about the place.

A light was in the tap-room, and they could see Captain Sams behind his bar with a huge revolver within reach.

This told the story.

The old war veteran was on guard.

Cortina sent several of his men in to get a drink of liquor.

At a given signal one of them was to seize the old veteran's revolver while the others leaped upon him.

This was successfully carried out.

Captain Sams made a bold and gallant effort to regain possession of his weapon, but the rascals were too quick for him, and he found himself in the clutches of three stalwart fellows.

It was now only a question of time as to when the veteran must succumb.

They had already gagged him so as to prevent any outcry on his part.

Inside of three minutes the old man lay behind his own bar, bound and utterly helpless.

Cortina with the rest of his men now entered.

His first act was to put out all the lights in the room with the exception of one, which he took in his hand.

Then selecting two of his men he bade them follow him.

The stairway was his objective point.

Already he knew the room in which the object of his pursuit was to be found, for his spies had been busy.

At the head of the stairs however, an obstacle confronted them.

This was a heavy door, barred or locked in some way so that it resisted all their efforts to force it.

Cortina muttered savage oaths.

He was not to be frustrated in his design by such an obstacle as this, however.

A whispered consultation ensued with one of his men, who appeared to be the spy made mention of before.

Then the men retreated once more down the stairs and through the tap-room.

Others followed them outside.

The spy professed to know where a ladder lay that would lead up to the window of the room they desired to reach.

When, however, they came to look for it this ladder was gone.

It had mysteriously disappeared, for the spy was ready to swear he had seen it in place not an hour before.

While some of the men hunted high and low for the missing ladder, Cortina stood alone biting the ends of his mustache and plunged in the deepest of thought.

He was in anything but a pleasant humor.

Everything seemed to be going wrong, and he knew not which way to turn in order to take advantage of the opportunity that had even then presented itself.

True, he might accomplish the desired result by placing a keg of powder in the tap-room with a fuse attached, and blowing the place up.

That might be an effectual method of getting rid of the party he sought to destroy, but Cortina was hardly ready to proceed to such an extreme measure as yet.

If things went on in this strain much longer he would feel as though something desperate must be done to accomplish his ends.

While he stood thus, waiting to hear news of the search, and cudgeling his brains to devise a plan that might be made to work in case the ladder was not found, he heard some one approaching.

"General, are you here?"

Hola! Pedro, is it you, my man? What news?"

"Good, general."

"Caramba! you have found the ladder?"

"It has been my good fortune."

"Where was it?"

"In the last place one would think of looking for it, general. Leaning up against the house wall, and directly under the little window of the senorita's room."

"The devil! We must look out."

"For what, general? It seems to me they did not want to give us too much trouble and arranged matters to suit us."

"Don't be a fool, Pedro. I tell you what I suspect—a trap."

"Carajo! how can it be?"

"That we will find out. Come and gather the men silently at that point."

Cortina was not the man to be caught napping.

He knew his business too well for that.

The very fact of the missing ladder being found all ready in position for their use, was a feature full of suspicion to him.

It had an evil look.

What trap could there be in connection with the ladder that would threaten them?

While he strode along a thought flashed into his mind that brought him to a sudden stand.

"Malediction!" he muttered.

"What now, general?" asked Pedro, who had accompanied him.

"I believe I understand it. Some one has been before us."

"And carried the girl off?"

"Yes. Curses on them if this is so."

His words could have but one explanation and this was in connection with those to whom Dancing Feather was a god—the Apaches.

Cortina now crept along the base of the wall like a serpent.

Presently his outstretched hand touched the almost perpendicular ladder which it was very nearly too dark to see.

Once beneath it, the ladder was outlined against the heavens.

Thus far the search of his men had been conducted with the utmost silence, so that if any one was near by they would not in all probability have been alarmed.

Not a sound was to be heard about the house.

Cortina sent Pedro up to investigate.

He could see the fellow ascending slowly until he reached the top, when he disappeared as though he had pulled himself into the room or had been assisted in so doing by a grip on his throat.

The man below knew not what to think.

He crouched there, watching and waiting, and when fully two minutes had gone by he felt like giving the alarm.

Surely something must have befallen his man else he should have heard from him ere this.

Perhaps there were enemies concealed inside the room and the ladder had been placed in position as a standing invitation for them to ascend.

Even the departure of Tom might have been a bogus one.

Screened by the gloom of night, he could easily have returned to the tavern to lie in wait for the emissaries of Cortina as they ascended one by one.

It was not so very pleasant to think of being clutched by his iron fingers as one poked his head within that room.

Cortina felt sure he would not enjoy it, and he had no intention of making the attempt.

His suspicions having become aroused by the long absence of Pedro, as has been said before, he was on the point of giving the alarm and calling his men to the spot, when they could put into operation some bolder plan, when he felt the ladder quiver under his touch.

Ah! that meant business.

Looking up again, he saw the dim outlines of a human figure back out of the window upon the ladder, and slowly commence the descent.

Pedro was coming down.

Had he discovered anything?

Cortina stood there waiting impatiently for his man to gain his side.

He dared not call out, for the stealthy manner in which the man was making the descent seemed to hint at some possible mystery.

Perhaps the girl was there and asleep!

Such a prospect would be glorious.

It was the intention of Cortina to steal the girl, and, carrying her off, murder her in the mountains, while at the same time they would leave such traces behind as would lead the people of Tucson to believe she had eventually fallen into the hands of the Indians again.

The man on the ladder had now reached the lower rung, and Cortina, stretching out his hand, let it fall upon his arm with the words:

"What luck, Pedro?"

Even as he uttered them Cortina shivered, for his hand had fallen upon the bare arm of an Apache brave!

CHAPTER XXX.

RIVAL NIGHT-HAWKS.

It was a situation well calculated to freeze the blood in the veins of the bravest man.

The truth had flashed upon the Mexican at the very second his hand fell upon the arm of the man on the ladder.

Pedro must have met with foul play above, else this Indian would not have been there.

Cortina was no coward.

He had the courage of a bulldog, and just about as much conscience.

In times gone by he had proved this on many a hotly-contested occasion.

When, therefore, he realized what was before him, instead of shrinking back, after that one spasm of astonished alarm, he threw himself forward.

More reasons than one governed him in this.

He was naturally aggressive, in the first place, and recognized in this Apache brave one who was not only a mortal foe, but who was even then endeavoring to cheat him out of the fruits of his strategy.

Again, by this quick movement he hoped and expected to prevent the savage from drawing a weapon, providing he did not already have one in his hand.

The forward action of the Mexican resulted in overthrowing the equilibrium of the Indian.

As a result, the two went down together.

The Apache, as quick as thought, had clasped his naked arms around his unknown assailant, and was ready for his share of work.

In Cortina he found no mean antagonist.

The general had another string to his bow besides that of personal prowess.

As he sprung upon his dusky foe with all the fury of the animal after which he was named, he gave utterance to a quick signal, which was well known to his men and would bring them to the spot in hot haste.

The two men were writhing and twisting about upon the ground at the foot of the ladder, like a couple of tiger-cats in deadly combat.

Each strove to get a grip upon the throat

of the other, and such a mutual desire necessitated an astonishing amount of clawing and squirming.

In the mean time assistance had come for Cortina, in the shape of his men.

It was time.

Possibly had this been delayed another minute all would have been up with the general.

The Apache had succeeded in gaining the upper position, and his hand was even in the act of closing upon the throat of the Mexican when a hand was in turn laid upon him.

Rough fingers clutched the Indian's throat and a keen *cuchillo* was plunged into his heart.

The cry he would have given utterance to died in its incipency, for he had received his death-blow.

Cortina struggled to his feet.

"Are you hurt, general?" asked the man whose knife had ended the affair.

"*Cospita!* no, but the red rascal?"

"My good blade ended his career, *senor.*"

"Good Querdo. Do you know where he came from?"

"Above?"

"Yes, and there must be others there. Pedro went up but came not down."

"Then we must investigate."

Querdo was a heavy set man who had never known the meaning of the word fear.

He knew the lay of the land full well, and when he had determined upon his course he whispered a few words in the ear of his leader after which he glided along the base of the wall.

At the end he stopped.

For one so heavy he exhibited a wonderful degree of agility.

Like a cat he climbed up the face of the wall, different protuberances assisting his progress.

A ledge running around the second story served him in this respect for a foothold.

He did not stop here.

The roof was his objective point.

Inside of another minute he had gained this and breathing heavily from his exertion he crawled over to where there was an opening.

Like most of the houses in the Southwest the roof was flat, and in the center was a means of exit from the floor beneath.

Down these stairs Querdo crept like a cat, not making the slightest sound for fear of betraying his presence to the keen ears he knew were on the alert near by.

At last he came to a door.

This was his objective point, and here he halted.

Would it yield to his endeavor?

He made trial and was pleased to learn that it was not fastened in any way.

Beyond lay the same inky darkness that enveloped his form where he crouched, and somewhere in that darkness were foes who had followed their fair god from the mountains and were now risking all to steal her away from the house of the pale-faces.

Perhaps they knew of his coming and were lying in wait for him?

Querdo held his *cuchillo* in one hand and a cocked revolver in the other.

It would have been a risky thing for an Indian to have laid his hand upon him just at that moment.

He touched the door again, and it swung out, opening wider.

Ah! he could now see the outline of the window, for the sky beyond was brighter than the surrounding walls.

This would serve his purpose well.

He crouched there, hardly daring to breathe for fear lest the sound should reach hostile ears.

Even when his eyes had become accustomed to the gloom, he could see nothing.

In vain he endeavored to pierce the blackness around him.

The thing was impossible.

Whatever lay there it was veiled from his sight entirely.

Querdo realized this, and once more turned his attention toward the window, determined to bide his time, as he knew his chance would soon come.

As he looked he started.

A dim figure could be seen, or part of one, to be more exact.

It was the head and shoulders of an Apache.

At first Querdo took it to be a woman, the long black hair falling below the shoulders deceiving him, but as the man turned his face sideways he realized his mistake.

For this he had waited.

The revolver he held was raised, but it was utterly out of the question to aim, so that he had to fire by intuition.

Suddenly the death-like silence that reigned within and without, was broken by the heavy crash of a revolver.

There was a lunging forward on the part of the Indian at the window—a heavy fall, and then all became still again.

One of the men outside could be heard running up the ladder.

Hardly had Querdo time to realize that he had brought down his man than he himself was borne down by a human figure that launched itself forward.

So exact was the leap of the Indian that it became apparent he had seen the figure of the crouching Mexican by the flash of the fellow's revolver.

Querdo was thus reduced to the necessity of battling for his own life.

As he was as plucky as daring, and held an ugly knife in his hand, the chances seemed about as much in his favor as that of his unseen antagonist.

By reason of some things it looked as though the Mexican ought to come out of the scrimmage first best, while the Apache at the same time offset these advantages, and presented reasons for victory on his own side.

Querdo was amazed at the fearful strength of the man with whom he was engaged.

The fellow seemed capable of doing with him almost what he pleased.

In vain he endeavored to use his knife—something occurred to prevent it every time.

The only consolation the man had, and in fact the only thing he could think of in his dire extremity, was the fact that his comrades were even then coming up the ladder, and must soon be on the spot to relieve him.

Even this might fail him.

They could come too late!

Ah! he caught sight of the leading one in the square of the window.

The fellow did not like the looks of the darkness within.

He tried to see what was going on, caught the gurgling and sputtering sounds that proceeded from the combatants, and turning to his companions, demanded:

"A light! hand up a light. There's deviltry going on inside here. A light, to see how the land lies!"

The light was speedily handed up.

It consisted of a long pine splinter, set on fire with the aid of a match.

At this moment Querdo's opponent seemed to be seized with a terrible desire to leave the place, in the quickest possible space of time.

The Mexican felt himself hurled to the other side of the room with terrible force.

Then the Apache shot out through the window, upsetting the man at the top, and he in his turn sweeping all the others from the ladder below.

Cortina saw a golden opportunity.

"Quick!" he said, hoarsely, "do your work with the girl, and we will swear the Apaches are to blame. Quick! up there, use your knife."

"Bring up a light," groaned Querdo from the window. "I'm afraid there is something wrong."

He was right.

When the light was carried above it was found that Dancing Feather had disappeared.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ON THE TRAIL.

THIS was the mystery that confronted Cortina and his followers.

The girl was gone?

Had they as well as the Indians hit upon the wrong room?

If so, then some one must have played a capital joke upon them.

Besides this, there remained but one alternative, and this was of such a dreadful nature that even Cortina could not believe it true.

He stood by the window deep in thought.

The night wind brought to his ears the sound of horses' hoofs beating upon the turf.

At first he pricked up his ears at the sound and then muttering, let his head fall again.

What a fool to think there could be anything in that.

There was hardly an hour of the day or night that some mounted party did not arrive at or leave Tucson, so that he had no reason to draw hope from this quarter.

A minute passed by.

Then there suddenly broke upon the town a wild cry from the lungs of a man.

"Indians! Indians!"

The words rung out on the still night air with startling distinctness.

They were followed by several shots, and after this nothing was to be heard but the rapidly receding sound of hoof-notes.

Cortina had been fully aroused by this occurrence, and was once more himself.

He took in the situation.

The little band of devoted Apaches had reached the town at about the time the other detachments had arrived.

Perhaps one of their number as a spy, had witnessed the coming of Tom and the young girl, and had marked the room whither she was shown in the hostelry.

Be that as it may, they knew the exact place where to look for her, as had been made evident by the ladder below the window.

The probability was that they had succeeded in abducting their fair god, and had her safely mounted, when the three braves who had just been encountered, had been sent back for some purpose, perhaps to fire the building, first removing the ladder and thus leave no trace of their having been there.

When the girl was found to be missing, the only conclusion her friends could arrive at would be that she had been smothered in the smoke and perished in the fire.

If this had been the design of the cunning Apaches, it was frustrated by the coming of Cortina and his band upon the scene.

Too many cooks spoil the broth, and in this case it had come near being made a mess of by both parties.

Cortina was not as angry as might have been expected.

Each party had something to boast of.

The Apaches had secured what they were after, though at the expense of their numbers, for two had been stricken down.

Cortina, on his part, though he had lost a man—Pedro having been choked and stabbed by the red-men as they drew him into the upper room—had reason to feel some satisfaction over the matter.

The girl had been taken away from the Texan, and in the hands of the Apaches she was as badly off as had originally been the case.

By this time the Indians must begin to realize that the Priestess of the Sun had not been an unwilling captive of Tucson Tom, and now that she was again in their hands they would doubtless watch her more closely.

Should the chances seem to favor her falling again into the hands of the whites, they would evidently rather murder her than let this occur.

From this it will be seen that Cortina had some reason to feel satisfied with the way things were going.

If he had not accomplished his object, he at least had the satisfaction of knowing that the Texan was defeated.

Quickly he and his men left the place, taking the body of Pedro with them.

The party then headed in the direction from whence had come those thrilling cries. Others were moving thither.

Men from the town, heavily armed, in large and small squads were to be met with here and there, blazing torches indicating their presence to each other.

A weak voice at last drew their attention: "This way, comrades, for the love of mercy. This way. *Caramba!* I am a dead man!"

Soon they were gathered around the man who lay upon the sward with several bullets in his body.

Through the crowd there broke at this moment a man who seemed laboring under some excitement.

It was Tucson Tom.

He had just come from the tavern where the story of the landlord and the presence

of the two dead Indians had awakened terrible suspicions in his mind.

The others gave way before him, as if, in the redoubtable Texan they recognized a man born to be a leader.

Tucson Tom bent over the wounded man.

The dull glare of the torches lit up the scene and lent a peculiar aspect to its component parts. There was that in the face of the stricken Mexican that told he had not long to live, and Tucson Tom saw that if any information was to be gotten out of him there was no time to waste.

"What! is it you, Carlos?"

"Si, Senor Tom," feebly responded the man.

"What brought you here, my friend?"

"Apache bullets—curse them."

"How many braves were there in the band? Think, Carlos, for we shall avenge your injuries. How many warriors could you count?"

The man was silent a moment, but it was only to catch his breath.

"About six, senor."

"One more question, my friend. These braves came here with a purpose, as you may suppose. Did they have a prisoner?"

His heart seemed to stand still as he waited for the reply.

"I do not know—yes, I think they did, for I remember now, just as I shouted, I saw a form among them, with a brave on each side, and the thought flashed upon me that they had taken a prisoner; but those cursed bullets have riddled me so. Ah! *carissima!* how they burn."

Tucson Tom was calm now.

The man was dying, and he had not yet answered that question fully.

"What made you think it was a prisoner they had instead of a wounded comrade?"

This was straight at the heart of the matter and could not but bring out the expected answer.

"Because it was a woman," he groaned.

That was enough.

Tucson Tom realized that all his good work had been for naught—that the young girl was again in the hands of the Apaches.

The affair would have to be done over again.

It was a fortunate thing that he was a man of such iron nerve, for to meet such an occasion he needed all his grit.

Pursuit was the first thing on the programme.

The Indians had come a long distance and their mustangs must be weary.

Mounted on fresh horses the pursuers would be able to overtake them ere long.

Tom immediately asked for volunteers.

There were a number who offered their services, and soon a gathering took place near the spot where Carlos lay dead.

Horses curveted around, men shouted to each other, and the jingling of weapons made merry music upon the night air.

Among the little party thus organized were several Mexicans.

The hatred borne by this people for the Apaches is something terrible.

As far back as we know anything of them they have been at war with each other, and the fierce forays of the Indians have met reprisals at times in daring expeditions to the heart of Apache-land by parties of rangers and jaguar-hunters, who have spared none in their mission of vengeance.

Many a Mexican home had mourned over the loss of some child carried away in one of these Apache forays, and whenever the opportunity came to strike a blow in memory of the past, men were not found wanting.

Old Captain Sams was one of the party and Francisco, the snake charmer another.

Tucson Tom feared that the little party of Apaches might, before they could be overhauled, meet with a larger band, and if he started alone upon the trail, he might thus have reason to regret the step.

He rode a mustang, and led Buckskin, for the latter was not as fresh as might have been wished, after the terrible strain of the past few days and nights.

The others of the party all had fresh mounts and were heavily armed.

It would be a bad time for the little band of Apaches should they be overtaken before they had been granted an opportunity for a coalescing with a larger party.

At the head of the party rode a leathery

old trapper named Arizona Abe, and as he glided along—his horse being led by one of the party—he held a lantern so as to distinguish the plain trail left by the Apaches.

In that party of rescuers was one man whose presence was a continual threat and menace to Tucson Tom.

Cortina had sent a spy to do his work!

CHAPTER XXXII.

ARIZONA ABE, THE TRAILER.

THEIR progress was necessarily slow.

They could not hope to come up with their red foes during the night.

Such a thing was beyond the bounds of all reason, for the Apaches could get the best speed possible out of their animals, while the traitors were compelled to move along at a speed equal to a dog-trot in order to conform with the pace of the man who led them.

Arizona Abe had seen long service on the plains and among the mountains of the Southwest.

Few Indian raids had been carried out without his being of the number.

He cherished a hatred for the Apaches that was like burning timber—no matter what the number of those slain, this terrible prejudice was never assuaged.

Upon the stock of his old rifle he had long rows of notches.

Each of them meant a death, and the part devoted to the Apaches equaled all the rest.

Many had speculated upon the cause of the old ranger's hatred, but the truth was known to a few.

It was a purely personal matter.

Abe may have lost friends from time to time in his various affairs with the Indians, but he was not avenging them in thus following his many trails.

Once he had himself come very near death at the hands of these red-men.

That he escaped was a miracle, for he was left for dead, having four bullets within the corporate limits of his body and as many lance wounds.

With wonderful tenacity of life he had crawled to a brook, revived himself with water and subsisting on the stock of dried meat he had on his person, managed eventually to gain the camp of some Mexicans.

Even this in itself was not the reason of his unquenchable hatred.

Arizona Abe wore a tight-fitting cap made of the skin of a gray wolf.

Had this been removed one would have seen a singular and horrible spectacle.

The man had been scalped.

Only a narrow fringe of iron-gray hair surrounded his cranium—the balance was rough and of a peculiar hue once seen never forgotten.

This was the reason of his malignity.

While he lived he would never get over the deep sense of humiliation which continually came upon him whenever he heard the name of an Apache mentioned.

Many a time had he gone out with the avowed purpose of recovering his lost scalp, but years had passed, and the object which had become his dearest in life was no nearer its fulfillment than when he began.

This then was the man upon whom Tucson Tom most depended.

There were others in the party fully as valiant as Arizona Abe, and whose motive in coming upon the expedition would no doubt bear a more rigid examination than his but none of them had such a wonderful fund of experience to draw from as the scalpless old prairie ranger.

As a trailer Abe had no equal.

He was perfectly at home in this respect, and it may be set down as certain that he was never happier than when leading a party upon the trail of Apache marauders.

As the hours went by they moved along slowly yet surely.

Once in a while the human hound in the lead would halt and examine the trail at a point where some suspicion had been aroused, only to go on again as before, at that tireless dog-trot.

It was about an hour before daybreak when he came to an abrupt halt.

This time he meant business.

There was that in his demeanor that told Tucson Tom something was amiss.

Halting the party he rode up to where Arizona Abe stood, and bending down in the saddle, touched him on the arm.

"What now, Abe?" he asked.

"Trail forked," returned the other.

Abe never wasted words.

His breath seemed too valuable for that.

The Texan knew they had reached a crisis in the game, and he understood full well that if a mistake was to be made at all now was the time it would be likely to occur.

That the girl had gone with one of the two parties was evident.

It simply remained to discover which they should follow.

"What is that yonder?" he asked, pointing to a small object that floated from a mesquite bush to the right, and past which one of the trails seemed to run.

Old Abe snickered.

"That's an old trick o' ther reds. It's a part o' the gal's toggery, but it war put thar by ther hands o' a brave."

He glided forward to examine the spot and in a minute called Tom to his side.

"Is it as you thought, Arizona?"

"Look thar!"

Tucson Tom, looking down could see the imprint of a moccasin in the soft soil.

One of the Indians had leaped from his steed to fasten the piece of cloth upon the twig, no doubt trusting to the hoofs of the horses that followed to obliterate the imprint.

"I see," said Tom, quickly, "they want to make us believe the girl went with this party: The trick's thin as water."

Arizona Abe gurgled with suppressed laughter and his beady eyes glittered as he raised them to the face of the Bowie Bravo.

"That's whar ye mistake, Tom. Them critters air sly devils, I tell 'ee. They reckoned as how they'd be follered by some half-way trackers, an' right hyar they laid as neat a trap as any I ever see'd."

"A trap!"

"That's what I calls it. Ye see they didn't know Ole Arizony war behind 'em. They reckoned that ye'd jump onter this hyer racket, an' sure that the gal war wid ther other party, go arter 'em helter-skelter, an' a fiend's own race they'd lead ye all."

"Do you mean to say the girl is with this party?" demanded Tom.

"That's the heft o' it, pard. The game war a good one, and it w'u'd 'a' succeeded wid such as are generally found along the border, fur ye critters jest know about enough o' Injun tactics ter fall inter ther trap."

"Be positive Abe, right here. Prove it in at least one other way. I comprehend now all that you say, and believe you are right, but to make a blunder at this point would be fatal to the success of our plans."

"Jest so."

The trailer got down on his hands and knees just beyond the mesquite bushes, and with the assistance of the lantern seemed to be examining the marks left by the horses of the little company.

He spent almost five minutes thus, during which time the party near by sat upon their steeds watching him curiously, and conversing in low tones among themselves.

At last the trailer arose.

"Well?" asked Tom, anxiously.

"It er all right," responded Abe.

"She went this way?"

"I'll stake my sculp on it," groaned the other.

"What new proof have you found?"

"This. Ye see thar are three hosses come this way, while four went that. It er easy ter think ther fourth carried ther gal, but 'twa'n't so. That hoss war empty."

"One o' these three carried a double load on his back—an Injun an' ther gal."

Tucson Tom now saw that there was every reason to believe what the old trailer said to be the truth.

The Apaches were exceedingly cunning, but they were not equal to the task of deceiving such a veteran Indian-fighter as Abe.

This knotty problem having been solved, the pursuit was resumed.

The night was far spent.

In another hour daylight would be at hand, and then they need no longer go forward at this snail's pace, but at a rapid gallop.

The thoughts of Tucson Tom, as he rode along were strange indeed.

How singularly had the position been reversed within the last score of hours.

Then he was the fugitive, bearing Dancing

Feather to civilization—now he was one of a hunting-party in pursuit of the Indians who were carrying the young girl back to the captivity she dreaded.

He remembered what awful catastrophes had overwhelmed the red-men, and could not but admire the devotion and heroic courage that had taken this little band to the very borders of civilization in order to wrest from the grasp of the pale-faces their fair priestess.

That they were men without fear, was proven already.

Then the three who rode off with the horse of the girl—they could expect nothing but death if the ruse succeeded and the hunters followed them, yet they had shown no hesitation, and were doing their utmost to draw the pursuit.

While they rode along, the darkness gradually gave way to a gray atmosphere, and they realized that the longed-for morning was at hand.

The pursuit now began in earnest, and the little band thundered along over the level prairie with but one purpose in view.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

IN THE SADDLE.

THE sun arose.

Eagerly Tucson Tom scanned the prairie ahead of them.

He could hardly have told what he hoped to see, but whatever it was he certainly found himself doomed to disappointment.

There were small groups of antelopes in sight, and a herd of bison far away to the northwest, but not a human being.

Arizona Abe noticed his action, for the two were riding side by side.

"No go, cap'n, an' it's as well in ther end. S'pose we war ter sight them critters now. What d'ye s'pose they'd do?"

"Fight like demons."

"Yas, sell their lives all-fired dear, arter they'd put it outen our power ter resky ther gal they worships."

"What! do you believe they'd murder her?"

"I know it."

"But she is sacred to them."

"See hyar, Cap. Rather than have her fall inter yer hands ag'in, they'd stab her ter ther heart. Ye don't know these hyar reds like me. I say, go slow, and git within a respectable distance so ye kin crawl up on 'em like over night."

"I see, old friend. Doubtless you are right. At any rate, I leave the whole business in your hands. Manage it as you please."

"Thank-ee, Cap. Never fear but Ole Arizony 'll bring it about all right."

There was confidence in the old prairie-man's voice, and Tucson Tom might have felt better only for the thought that came to him ever and anon respecting the young girl and her terrible situation.

What if some accident were to occur?

A thousand such were at least among the possibilities.

What if they should come upon the trio of Apaches unexpectedly at some time during the day?

The result would be terrible should the Indians do as Abe prophesied and kill their captive before sacrificing their own lives.

He had much to engage his thoughts as he rode on with the rest, and when he noticed from time to time that Arizona Abe was slackening their pace, he offered no objection such as might have come naturally from his impatient lips had he not been conversant with the true inwardness of the case.

Thus the time passed.

Noon found them pushing onward, though they halted for an hour beneath the shade of a timber growth to rest their horses and themselves.

Both were sadly in need of food, and the time was passed in satisfying their hunger and the cravings of thirst.

Again they were on the way.

The sun scorched them, and their steeds panted with the heat like dogs, yet brave hearts were there, and those men were ready to encounter more difficulties than this for the sake of overtaking the daring Indians who had even invaded Tucson itself in order to carry out their bold plan.

More than once Tom's eyes had ranged over the little band.

There were a dozen men in all, without counting himself or Abe.

Among them were several well-known hunters, and the Mexicans present showed just as much eagerness for the success of the expedition as any of their comrades.

Several Tom did not know, but just then he had no suspicion of foul play.

His eyes had fallen more than once on the strange snake-charmer.

Francisco rode with the rest, and had not a word for any one.

Those who had seen his method of disposing of the assassin who had tried to murder him in the casino, gave him a wide berth, fearing the deadly serpent which they knew was hidden securely on his person.

Several times Tom was tempted to enter into conversation with this man.

He knew the secret concerning Mabel, and of all men was the one who could sweep away the cloud of mystery connected with her past.

Each time, however, he controlled himself, and allowed his thoughts to run in different channels, though they always came back to Mabel and the peril threatening her.

How tedious were the hours.

Again and again did Tucson Tom rise in his stirrups and survey the land ahead.

They no longer rode over the level prairie.

In this direction the ground had first become rolling, like the billows of the ocean, and then, elevations were reached.

The Indians had kept their wiry little mustangs at it persistently.

An Indian can get a great deal more out of a horse than any white that ever breathed and they were proving this now.

When the rolling land had been struck, the trail led along one of the depressions.

There was much wisdom in this course, as it saved the mustangs of the Indians and at the same time kept them out of sight should any hostile party be upon the plain.

Arizona Abe was not averse to it either.

So long as they were riding along this hollow their chances of discovery by those they were pursuing, should the Apaches have struck the mountain spur, would be lessened.

How many miles had been put behind them it would be quite impossible to say, but pursuers and pursued had passed over an incredible distance since the chase began, although they were perhaps not thirty miles away from Tucson as the crow flies.

Once Tucson Tom expressed a fear that they might be treading too closely upon the heels of the fugitives.

The old ranger assured him however that those they pursued were at least two hours ahead and their mustangs gave no indication of breaking down as yet.

Had it been desirable for our friends to have overtaken the Indians, such a thing could have been done by this time.

It was not their policy to do this.

If possible they desired that even their presence should not be discovered, though this might prove rather difficult to conceal.

The afternoon was more than half over when Arizona Abe brought them all to a sudden halt.

"See," said he, "hyer they halted. One o' 'em rode up ther bank ter take a peek. He called ther rest an' up they swept. Then the course war resumed."

"What did they see?" asked Tom.

"I think we'll find out further on. I has my 'spicions though," grunted Abe.

They rode along.

Before a mile had been passed over there were sudden explanations from those who were in the advance.

The trail of the three Indians could no longer be seen.

It was swallowed up in a multitude of hoof-prints, looking at which one's first thought would be that a herd of mustangs had swept down into the depression and followed the course taken by the fugitives.

Arizona Abe knew better than that.

True, there had been mustangs there, but every one of them bore a red rider on his back.

The fugitives had been met by friends.

Tucson Tom now realized the wisdom of his course in waiting to gather a party instead of starting off alone.

Had this former occurred his hopes would be small indeed, but when he looked along the line of his valiant comrades, he believed

they were equal in valor and cunning to any band of Indians that ever roamed the plains.

The whole band had continued on, the fugitives being doubtless transferred to fresher mustangs.

Now and then Arizona Abe twisted his neck to look up at the heavens, which during the last hour had become strangely overcast.

A storm was brewing.

The rain might do them incalculable injury by washing away the trail.

Arizona quickened his speed, and the little party dashed along the depression with the eagerness of hounds on the scent.

It was no longer light.

Although night had not yet come, it was being preceded by a semi-gloom that rendered objects invisible a few hundred yards away.

Still they had no trouble in seeing the trail, for it was certainly broad enough.

At length it left the depression and made a break for the elevation.

Tucson Tom was close enough to the guide to hear the words that fell from his lips.

"Taken ter ther Bufler Gap?"

Then he knew where they were.

A pass that divided the mountains was known by the name of Buffalo Gap, and the dusky fugitives had been aiming for this all along, though in a roundabout way, so as not to excite suspicion, lest the whites should head them off, and thus complete their discomfiture.

They were now near this place.

Tucson Tom had gone through it more than once.

He well remembered its weird aspect.

Ragged walls on either side overhung the narrow path, that, for a portion of the way, ran along the edge of an abyss the depth of which no man could know.

Through this split in the mountains the Apaches had gone, and our friends were now face to face with a serious question.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THROUGH BUFFALO GAP.

Was the pass guarded?

The Indians would no doubt camp on the other side, where there was a favorable spot, but the chances seemed to be that they would not leave Buffalo Gap free for passage.

Arizona Abe and Tom consulted.

They were now within a short distance of the pass, and a false step might be their ruin.

The consultation resulted in a determination to make a scouting-tour so as to get the lay of the land.

In company with the old trailer, Tom set out.

They left their horses behind.

While the two were thus venturing into the dark pass on such a perilous errand, the remainder of the party had also work to do, though of a far different kind.

This consisted of muzzling the horses with old coats or anything else that came handy, so that they could not betray their masters when in a place of peril, by an untimely neigh.

The hoofs were also muffled.

Leaving the party thus providing against exigencies we will follow the two scouts.

Arizona Abe had his trusty rifle with him, for it was seldom he permitted himself to be separated from that weapon; but Tom felt well enough armed to possess the weapons he generally carried.

The darkness grew apace as they approached the pass.

Now and then a flash of lightning would cut across the sky, but as yet the storm was far away.

The mountains loomed up grimly before them, as though stretching a barrier in the way of their progress.

Fortunately Arizona was perfectly at home in this quarter.

His companion was perfectly content to have him lead the way.

It was no small task to even follow, considering the many difficulties that lay in the way.

When they reached the entrance of Buffalo Gap, they paused to listen.

Strange sounds came from its interior—sounds that might have dismayed a timid man or one to whom the place was unknown,

but these two were not listening to the weird noises for the first time.

They knew their origin.

The wind was sweeping through the gap, making strange music as it was caught by numberless projections, until there came that distorted melody that, rising and falling, now fierce and strong, anon mellow and exceedingly plaintive, impressed the soul even of the rude prairie ranger.

There was an old legend among the Indians in connection with this strange place, to the effect that a maiden whose lover had proven false had sped an arrow through his heart as he came riding through the pass, leaping after his lifeless body into the gulf that yawned in one portion, and that at times her spirit could be heard crying, laughing and moaning according to the state of the weather.

Nothing came to their ears that would indicate the presence of danger, yet they knew full well fierce foes were not far away, who, if not aware of their presence in the vicinity would at least be on their guard.

An owl hooted near by, and his melancholy note seemed to be in unison with the weird surroundings.

Arizona Abe had no further reason for hesitation.

He advanced, and Tom boldly followed.

Like a pair of shadows they plunged into the black depths that immediately swallowed them up.

At the moment of their entrance something struck Tom a smart blow on his sombrero.

He looked up just in time to feel a second large drop of water splash upon his face.

The rain!

It had come at last, and there could be no telling when the full force of the storm burst upon them.

Let it come—they might even find a chance to make its presence advantageous.

To pass through Buzzard's Gap in the pitch black gloom of night was a feat few men would like to attempt, yet here were two daring souls not only ready to try it, but even determined if necessary to bring the balance of the party, horses and all, through the pass.

True, the electric fluid aided them.

Arizona Abe would wait until the lightning flashed, and then take in the lay of the land ahead, while at the same time he kept his eyes on the lookout for signs of the foe.

Their progress was necessarily slow, but there was little temptation to increase it, knowing as they did what lay near, and how easy it would be to fall into the chasm.

The roaring sound grew louder and louder and soon the two men were obliged to cling to the rocks for support, so violent was the wind that rushed through the gorge.

Abe drew his companion in under a projecting rock.

It was high time.

Stones were falling about them that had been dislodged from the walls above, and it might be death to be struck by one of these.

The rain also came down in torrents.

Tucson Tom would never forget that hour.

The blaze of the forked lightning blinded them, and the crashing thunder made the very mountains quake.

There was hope that the storm would soon be over, because of its violence, and meanwhile the scouts crouched beneath their shelter.

When the wind had gone down they crept forth, and heedless of the falling rain which still poured pitilessly, they made their way along the pass.

At the narrow portion, Abe was more than once compelled to push a stone over into the chasm that had fallen from above and barred their progress.

Even with daylight it was not much of a pleasure to pass through Buffalo Gap, and under such circumstances as those which beset our friends, the case was pretty rough.

Tom was more than once reminded of his recent adventure in an arroyo, when the water-cloud burst and drowned out the Apaches with the aqueous avalanche.

Every minute they expected to come upon an Apache sentry.

Their eyes scanned the rocky wall ahead each time the lightning flashed, but as yet they had made no discovery.

It was grand to look up when the sky was cleft by the electric fluid, and see the gaunt walls of rock far above, cut in black silhouette against the yellow sky, but these two men had no eye just then for the picturesque or sublime, their attention being wholly taken up with the danger that threatened them on every side.

Tom felt the hand of his companion fall on his arm.

He knew what this meant. Arizona Abe had made a discovery of some sort.

The two men crouched there for the space of half a minute or so; then another flash illuminated the gorge.

As the rain had by this time almost entirely ceased, it was not difficult to see some distance down the gap.

Ha! Arizona had not been mistaken.

The figure of an Indian was in sight.

He leaned against the wall, with a shelf of rock above him, and seemed to be making the best of a bad bargain.

The Texan turned to his companion.

Abe had stretched his scrawny neck and taken in the situation as well as he was able.

In this he had a purpose, for that sentry must be removed from their path ere they could push forward on the work that brought them there.

With a few whispered words the old skeleton scout left his companion and glided forward.

After he had gone, the seconds seemed like hours to the crouching man, and he waited with great impatience the coming of the next flash.

Good Heavens! would that dark mantle that hung so closely upon the gulch never be rent by the vivid lightning?

At last it came.

The ragged outlines of the rocky walls, even the narrow path before him was sharply defined, so that the minutest detail could be seen by a quick and keen eye.

Tom glanced along the shelf of flinty rock until his eye caught the figure of the Indian sentry.

He was standing in exactly the same position as they had seen him before, his blanket about his head and shoulders—motionless as the rock itself.

Something else caught Tom's attention.

About ten feet nearer than the Apache was a peculiar-looking rock that lay flat upon the shelf.

Closer investigation would have revealed a startling fact in connection with this—it was a human figure, that lay flattened out there as motionless as though one of the falling boulders had crushed in his skull.

Arizona was close to his prey.

The darkness closed in upon the scene almost instantly, and it was lost to view.

Again the Texan held his breath while he awaited another flash.

What would this disclose?

He could not even allow himself to guess, but craned his neck in anticipation.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A QUEER SURROUND

ALL things must have an end.

Tucson Tom thought about an hour had passed by, when in reality it was not much more than a minute when once more came the light.

His eyes fell upon the tall form under the rock, blanket and all.

Where was Arizona Abe?

Even as this mental question seemed to take form in his brain he saw the arm of the sentinel raised and make a beckoning motion as though bidding him come on.

The truth flashed upon him.

Arizona Abe had done his work, and had afterward assumed the blanket of the Apache to deceive any hostile eyes that might wander in that direction.

The Texan cautiously advanced.

When he reached the spot he was greeted by the low chuckle of the old trailer.

"Got him Tom, my boy," he muttered.

"Where is he?" asked the other.

"Rolled over inter ther gap thar. He fell like ripe grain. My weapon touched his heart c'en'most as soon as my hand did his throat. Ugh! I wish I had every mother's son o' 'em in ther same persition."

There could be no doubt but what he would have treated them in the same way.

No blood could apparently wipe out the hatred this old sinner felt for Apache braves, and the longer his account grew, the fiercer that feeling became.

As the way was now open, there was in reality nothing to hinder their forward movement, so again they pushed along the gap.

They were now past the gulf.

The route, although still strewn with fallen rocks, was no longer dangerous except in so far as the Indians themselves were concerned.

The presence of the Apache sentry was not conclusive evidence that the Indians were in camp near by.

Even if they had gone on they might have left a guard in the pass to prevent any pursuers from making use of Buzzard's Gap until they were well on their way.

Had this been done, however, it was more than likely that half a dozen warriors would have constituted this guard, and besides, their horses would have been near at hand so that they could escape readily when the time came for flight.

Thus the presence of a single brave seemed to point to the fact that the Apaches were still in the immediate vicinity.

Arizona Abe had little doubt of this.

He moved on with a confidence that was born of his convictions.

Inside of five minutes they had left the gap behind them, and stood upon the other side of the mountain spur.

Before them was now spread out a basin, and here it was the camp must be located.

Abe knew a spring gurgled from the rocks and that at this point the chances were ten to one they would find those whom they sought.

There was no sign of a fire to be seen from their present position, and they would have to move closer if they expected to discover the presence of the Apaches with their eyes.

True, the lightning still flashed at regular intervals, but the wilderness of trees and rocks prevented their discovering anything that would be of advantage.

In this their ears proved more valuable.

The whinny of a mustang was heard, and by this they were able to decide that the camp was located just where the old trailer had believed must be the case—at the spring on the side of the basin.

It was decided to approach.

Possibly they might learn something of the camp, which would be of advantage.

Instead of following the trodden path leading down into the basin or valley, and which had been beaten from time to time by countless numbers of buffalo and mustangs, Abe led the ranger by a roundabout way, so as to strike the camp from one side.

Silent as death they drew near.

Within a short distance of them fully three-score fierce Apache braves were slumbering.

It was not a task for untried nerves, for no novice could ever approach a large Indian camp without betraying his presence.

These two men possessed every necessity for such a task, and were, moreover, now on their mettle.

They crept over the ground like cats, parting the bushes and gliding on in the route that promised the best shelter.

Everything was wet, but there was some satisfaction in the fact that the rain had now ceased entirely, though the heavens were still heavy with clouds.

It was reasonable to suppose that the Indians would have sentries about their camp, seeing that they were far away from home.

The corral in which the horses were confined was speedily discovered.

Beyond lay the camp.

By the fitful flashes of lightning, darting from the lowering clouds, they saw the forms of the sleeping braves scattered here and there, covered with their blankets.

Some had doubtless moved to where they could secure more shelter, but the others had remained in the open, utterly unmindful of the late deluge that must have soaked them through and through.

The two scouts caught the murmur of several guttural voices near them, and after listening a moment they discovered that the speakers were debating the advisability of starting a fire, which went to show there were some among them who did not propose

to remain soaking wet if they could help it, even if their sole garment consisted of a pair of buckskin breeches.

Whatever powerful argument was advanced, the party desiring the blaze won a reluctant consent from the other side.

Dry wood was obtained from the interior of an old log, and ere long a tongue of flame shot up, which was augmented by others, until finally quite a roaring blaze was had.

Around this gathered a number of the Apaches, and the heat seemed to arouse those who had been lying asleep, for they aroused themselves and set about doing likewise.

A fire started here and another there, until the scene became quite interesting.

It looked not unlike a bivouac of soldiers, only these grim, giant warriors had nothing military about their bearing unless it was their straight forms.

Our two friends had seen the fires started with the conviction that it was time they were backing out of their dangerous quarters.

This determination was for the time being lost sight of by Tucson Tom.

The increasing light had given him a new thought, and he was scanning every inch of the Indian camp within range of his vision, hoping to discover the object of the expedition—Dancing Feather.

She was not to be seen!

Again he surveyed the ground, but with no better success than before.

Could it be that the old trailer had made a terrible mistake when he decided that the girl had come with the party they had been pursuing during the day?

If so, then they had no hope of overtaking her short of the Indian village, and what Tucson Tom had accomplished would have to be done over again.

Arizona Abe could not but notice the uneasiness of his friend, and he could easily divine the reason of it.

He drew Tom's attention to a certain quarter, and there the young ranger saw what he had not noticed before.

A small lodge of skins had been erected.

It lay partly in the shadows, and was moreover so like the background as to present no sharp contrast that would catch the eye.

In this no doubt was the fair Priestess of the Sun, for these bronzed braves worshiped the lovely girl as a part of their deity, and would treat her with all gentleness, though firm in the resolve not to let her escape.

Ah! how Tom's heart throbbed as his eyes remained glued upon this lodge as though they would pierce its sides and behold the object of his love within.

How was she to be rescued?

Near by he had a dozen good men and true who were impatient to hurl themselves upon the Apaches, five to one though the Indians might be, but this in itself was not sufficient.

The girl must be saved before the assault was made, or she would be carried off by some of the Apaches while the rest met the onset of the whites as bravely as their kind have ever been known to do.

Tom surveyed the situation of the lodge and was rapidly arranging a plan of operations when his attention was drawn to the trailer.

Abe was chuckling and shaking as though he had discovered one of the most comical things on record.

"What is it?" whispered Tom.

"Too funny fur anything. Ther idea o' us two galoots lyin' hyar an' lettin' 'em do it," and he fell to chuckling again.

"Do what?" demanded Tom.

"Look ther way we come, dash it, boyee."

Tucson Tom turned his head. What he saw was far from being pleasant.

The ring of fires was now complete, so that they were surrounded by Indian blazes;

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE SCOUT'S PERIL.

THE situation was a desperate one.

That was why old Arizona seemed to be so dreadfully tickled over it. The more desperate the case, the better he liked it.

With Tucson Tom it was exactly the reverse.

However much he might have enjoyed a brush with the fierce Apaches at some time

when no one he knew was in danger, the case was now very different.

His whole mind was bent upon Dancing Feather and how to rescue her from the hands of those who would take her back to the captivity from which she had so recently been saved through his instrumentality—a state that was worse to her than death.

It can be readily appreciated, therefore, that under these circumstances, Tom was annoyed to find that in this very peculiar manner they had unwittingly gotten themselves into this new scrape.

It was simply an accident.

Certainly the Indians had no design in what had been done.

The result was almost the same, however, for our friends found themselves surrounded by a circle of fires.

Was there no means of escape?

Eagerly they cast their eyes around the circle, and were forced to confess that for once fate seemed decidedly against them.

There did not appear to be even a loop-hole of promise.

This was discouraging, but these two men were not apt to give in tamely.

Such difficulties generally caused them to shut their teeth more firmly and resolve to overcome the trouble at any cost.

A second survey of the situation a little more calm than the first, resulted in their picking up something of hope.

At one particular point there seemed to be something of a passage between two of the fires.

True, there was much risk in attempting it, but as their only hope lay in this quarter it must be tried, and without delay.

Nothing was to be gained by waiting.

The sooner they went at the business the quicker it would be over.

Brave men never halt before a difficulty.

They have a hot impatience to strike at the Gordian knot, as Alexander did of old, and sever what could not be untied.

The Indians seemed to be pretty generally awake, and were drying themselves by the many fires.

Into Tom's mind there drifted the thought that possibly they intended resuming their long journey before daylight, and were now beginning the first of their preparations by drying themselves.

If this were so the scouts had need of haste to get back to their friends in time to accomplish the work they had on hand before the Apaches got ready to move.

Oh, what a cruel fate it was kept them in such a fix, when they desired freedom of movement so much just then.

Tom allowed his companion to take the initiative, fearing lest his own impatience might ruin all.

Arizona Abe did not seem to be in any haste, and although Tom mentally fumed and fretted over the tardiness of his comrade, perhaps it was just as well after all.

The old trailer knew that nothing was to be accomplished by hurrying, and he did not intend to be shaken out of his usual methodical style of going at things.

First, he drew the Indian blanket, which he had held on to through all, around his person, much as an ancient Roman might his toga, only the cramped quarters prevented any dignity.

The blanket partially covered his head.

Thus, while crawling along, he could readily be taken for an Apache brave, if by some accident hostile eyes rested upon him.

Reckless old Indian-fighter as he was, Abe never had been known to neglect any caution when such a thing came up in the natural course of events.

He would not go out of his way to find it, and no man could have enjoyed such a novel situation, as the present, more than Abe did, yet he knew it was his business to circumvent the red-skins and leave them no chance for congratulation.

Aiming for the one narrow passage that seemed to promise them hope, they moved along.

It seemed to Tom as if they were advancing at a snail's pace, and several times he ran his head into the rear car of the train ahead.

It was simply a marvel that they were not discovered.

The grass through which they were making their way was not over a foot in height,

and though a few trees and bushes gave them some assistance, it was not much to rely on.

Once Tom felt positive the game was up.

Near them a burly brave sat by a fire with his back toward the blaze.

So close were they that they could even see his beady black eyes.

Those cunning orbs were now fastened upon the grass at the very point where the two white scouts chanced to be at that moment.

Evidently he had seen something that had attracted his attention.

An Indian's suspicions are aroused by the most trivial circumstances.

It would seem as though nothing could keep them from discovery, for even if they remained quiet, the fellow was very likely to investigate, in order to satisfy himself.

Arizona was equal to the occasion, however, and while Tom's hand was seeking a revolver so as to be ready to give the dusky devils a series of shots, he saw his companion suddenly sit upright in the grass.

Abe had a smooth face, burned by the sun as brown as any Indian's, and as the blanket was bundled about his head and shoulders, it was the most natural thing in the world for the keen-eyed Apache to mistake him for a fellow-brave.

Perfectly satisfied he turned away.

Abe took advantage of the situation to drop once more to a flat position, and hunch himself along in the direction of freedom.

Tom was at his heels.

He had great respect for the old trailer, and although irritated by Abe's chuckling at times when to him the situation appeared the most serious, manifested no disposition to quarrel with his good friend.

Their progress had been necessarily slow, but by this time they had passed over the most difficult part of the business.

The gantlet had thus far been safely passed, and every foot of ground covered now, took them out of the danger instead of into it.

Looking back, Tom could not see any further signs on the part of the Indians that would indicate a speedy intention of moving, and he hoped that after all his belief in that direction had been without foundation.

It was at this moment he heard a low exclamation from in front.

Turning his eyes hastily in that quarter, he realized that a new danger had appeared to threaten their safety.

Arizona Abe had run suddenly upon a brave who was sleeping in the grass, and as his attention at the time was wholly taken up with what lay in the rear, he did not know of the fellow's proximity until he actually laid his hand on his face.

Under distressing circumstances like these there was but one thing to do, and this must be done with exceeding quickness.

The brave must be prevented from giving the alarm, no matter at what cost.

Abe knew this full well.

He was accustomed to having emergencies such as this fly in his face.

The touch of his hand had been enough to arouse the slumbering warrior.

Looking up he beheld, as he believed, the form of a fellow brave bending over him, and a low "wagh" escaped his lips, as though he were surprised at the method taken to arouse him.

Possibly, had he been given time, the fellow would have discovered his mistake and aroused the whole camp in quick order.

Time was too precious just then to be given to any one, and Arizona Abe had none to spare.

He believed his own interests and those of his companion would best be served by placing it out of the Indian's power to do any harm.

This was pretty rough on the Indian, but when a man's life is in the scale, it is astonishing how utterly insignificant some other man's life becomes to him.

Besides, Old Abe was a genuine Indian-fighter, and he believed he had good cause for taking the life of every Apache that drew breath.

The first thing he did, therefore, was to let his hand glide up to the throat of the brave, about which his iron fingers were instantly clutched.

Then his whole weight was thrown forward so as to pin the fellow to the ground.

It was lucky for the two scouts that some little distance now separated them from the nearest camp-fire, else they had now been surely discovered.

When those fingers of the Apache-hater once twined about the neck of an Indian, it was all up with that unfortunate being.

So in this case.

The sensation of choking and the weight of the scout's body upon him so paralyzed the faculties of the Indian that he could offer little resistance to his fate.

When Arizona withdrew his grasp the brave was beyond the power of doing harm, for he had been choked to death.

Their way was now clear!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A MAN WITH THE LIVES OF A CAT.

IN five minutes they were clear of the camp.

Then they came to a halt in order to have a brief consultation.

It was best to know exactly what to do before starting in.

In this short talk Arizona Abe learned that above all things Tucson Tom's desire was the rescue of the young girl, held a captive in the Apache camp.

When this had been done they could talk about "sailing in" and cleaning out the reds, but not before.

It was speedily decided that one of them should return to where the rest of the boys had been left and bring them to the spot.

While this was taking place the other was to rescue the girl.

Who should stay?

Tom knew that the old trailer would be of more value than himself under such circumstances, and though above all things he would have liked to be the one who should appear to Mabel in her distress, he believed it to be to her advantage that Abe should do it while he went for the others.

This being decided, each of them set about the task assigned to him.

Tom moved away so as to make a half-circuit and pass around the camp.

Thus he could gain the gap without any fear of discovery.

It was not a very pleasant prospect to think of, but necessity compelled him to enter upon it, and he went forward boldly.

The darkness was fearful save when the lightning flashed and rent the veil for a brief space of time.

This dazzling light only served to make the subsequent gloom more intense.

Tom had no misgivings.

His thoughts were wholly upon the helpless girl in the power of the Apaches, and yet he kept a sharp lookout, for he had no desire to tumble into that yawning gulf that seemed to be a part of the pass.

Groping his way along in the gloom, and taking advantage of the occasional periods of light, he made good progress.

In this way he drew near the spot where Arizona Abe had had his encounter with the Apache who was guarding the pass.

When the next flash came, Tom saw directly in front of him a crouching human figure.

There could be no mistaking the fact that it was an Apache warrior.

Thoughts fly quickly on such occasions, and he did not ponder long over the matter.

One of two things must be so. Either an Indian from the camp had come to see how it fared with the sentry in the gap; perhaps ordered to take his place, or else the man whom Abe had choked and stabbed, afterward throwing his body into the gulf, had in some miraculous manner been saved, and was now on his way to the camp to give the alarm.

Had he been seen?

This Tom could not say, and yet as he had caught sight of the Indian it was but fair to presume that the discovery was mutual.

Tom drew a bowie.

An alarm would in all probability mean the death of poor Dancing Feather, or at least her continued captivity.

He gritted his teeth at the thought and resolved that such a thing must not be.

The Indian was crouching before him so that nothing seemed to be in the way of his taking possession of him.

He glided forward.

On one side was the wall of rock, on the other the deep abyss.

No man could have moved with more caution, and when he finally precipitated himself upon the astonished red man, the latter was taken completely by surprise.

He had been straining his senses to detect what the other was about, when the ranger suddenly descended upon him like a thunderbolt.

So astonishing was Tom's assault that the outcry that involuntarily arose to the lips of the Apache was cut short.

The struggle was decisive and fierce.

Truth to tell, it was the same warrior whom Arizona had hurled over the edge of the abyss.

It was not often the old trailer missed his man, but in this instance fate conspired against him, and in spite of iron fingers, steel blade and the fact of the man's being hurled into the pit, he had been saved by a friendly ledge, and had crawled out of it when his senses returned.

Once Tom came very near going over the edge along with his enemy, and it was only by a tremendous exertion that he saved himself.

He was more powerful than the Indian, who had been weakened by his previous experience, but the fellow was fighting for his life and writhed and twisted in the grasp of the scout until it took all of Tom's energies to hold him.

Determined that the fellow should not have the chance he desired, to awaken the echoes of the pass with a shrill yell, the ranger threw every atom of strength he possessed into the conflict, and was gratified to find that slowly and surely he was pushing the unfortunate Indian to the wall.

This time when the Apache went over the edge it would be to stay.

When he had reduced the fellow to a state of utter insensibility, Tom cast him from him, and was gratified to see him go into the depths, just as a last flash of lightning illuminated the scene.

He breathed a sigh of relief.

The danger had been, not so much personal, for he was able to cope with the Indian at any time, but he had feared lest the fellow should destroy all their plans by giving the alarm.

There was no telling what damage a shout from him might not do.

Perhaps old Arizona would be in a ticklish place where discovery might be certain in the event of an alarm, and a movement on the part of the Indian.

Tucson Tom groped his way through the balance of the gap.

Once on the other side he made his way to the spot where the balance of the band had been left, while he and Abe went forward to scout.

He found them impatient at the long delay.

They had succeeded in muffling the hoofs of their horses, and bandaging their heads so that they could sound no note of betrayal, and were now listening for the coming of the two upon whom they looked as leaders.

Tucson Tom glided among them like a specter—indeed, they had no idea of his being near until he strode into their midst.

All was now activity.

The little band moved forward to the pass.

It had been decided to bring the horses on as there might be some need of them.

Perhaps this was not the wisest move that could be made, but this question could only be settled by experience.

They believed it wise to be on the safe side and have the means of pursuit or flight at hand in case they were needed.

Tucson Tom led the way.

Each man was on foot and led his own horse.

To make assurance doubly sure he groped his way along with one hand pressed against the wall.

It was not long before Buckskin gave a low snort, and acted in a way Tom knew too well.

Possibly the yellow steed had gotten a scent of the Indian guard's blood.

Judge of the ranger's intense amazement when he saw, by the next flash of lightning, the same Indian guard, twice hurled to his death, crawling up over the edge of the abyss!

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ABE TURNS AT BAY.

WHEN Arizona Abe was left to his own resources, he set about the work he had agreed to accomplish for his friend.

Tom could not have given the job to one more capable of performing it.

The old praireman's whole life had been spent upon the border, and there were few things in connection with the Indians that he was not acquainted with.

No sooner had Tom left him than he moved off in a direction just opposite to that taken by the young ranger.

His object, as may be readily guessed, was to get in the rear of the little lodge, so that he could approach it with less danger.

With the blanket over his head and concealing the upper half of his body, Abe could readily pass for an Apache in the uncertain light of the flickering camp-fires.

He determined therefore to move along boldly, for stealthy actions would be sure to excite suspicion.

The skin lodge was now in sight.

There was no fire in the rear of it, though one on each side made this portion anything but dark.

Abe's keen eye was quick to notice that the grass and bushes were heavy enough to screen one, and he believed the girl, if she were as bright as Tom had given him reason to believe, might escape that way unseen.

He moved forward with the gait of an Indian, and sunk down near the lodge.

Old veteran as he was, the ranger could not but feel his heart beat more rapidly than was its wont.

It was a crisis.

Had he aroused suspicion in the mind of any one Indian?

Several pairs of eyes had been turned upon him as he moved forward.

The question was, would he be suspected?

As he lay there, the old Indian-fighter grasped his rifle in a tight grip, ready to spring up and deal about him if the worst came.

A minute passed.

There was no alarm raised.

This in itself was satisfactory, but he could not depend upon it wholly.

Possibly if any of the Apaches had thought his actions strange they might follow up the idea by an investigation.

In spite of this he had no time to lose.

To reach the lodge he was now compelled to pass over several yards, but the grass hid his movements, and to a man of his experience this was likely to prove a small task.

He succeeded in accomplishing it.

Out came his keen-edged knife, and when this was pressed against the skin of the lodge, it parted, leaving an opening.

Abe listened, but nothing was heard that could be taken as a warning.

He had every reason to believe all was well.

Believing thus, he quietly inserted his arm through the opening he had made.

He touched something—the hand of a human being—a small warm hand that could only belong to one of the gentler sex.

This he squeezed, believing such action could not possibly be misconstrued.

There was the lowest possible exclamation from within. He felt the girl move, and knew when she ran her hand over the side of the lodge until it came upon the opening.

Her face was close to his.

"Who is it?" she breathed.

"A friend o' yer Tom," answered Abe.

Her breath came fast at the mention of that beloved name.

"Is he near?" she asked.

"Clost by wid ther boyees. I'm an' ole coon named Arizony Abe, an' it's my beholdin' dooty ter git yer outen this place afore ther critters make ther hair fly. Hev yer got ther grit ter try it, little 'un?"

"Try me," she answered.

The old man chuckled almost audibly.

There was that about the quick reply that tickled him not a little.

Rough old fellow as Abe was, and despising most of the ordinary things that go to make up the beauty of life, he certainly was a great admirer of bravery, and when he found this quality in the heart of a girl, it mattered nothing to him whether she was handsome or not, she commanded his respect.

There had been no hesitation about the reply of Dancing Feather.

Yes, he would try her!

Quickly he gave her directions such as she could have no difficulty in understanding.

There was no need of haste.

It would be better that the attempt was not made until Tucson Tom and the others reached the scene, for in that case they would be on hand to lend their assistance in case of discovery on the part of the Apaches.

Again the girl's Indian education would come into play.

She had not crept up on the cunning deer for nothing. The knowledge obtained while she was an involuntary member of the Apache town would now possibly save her life, and at least bring about her freedom.

It is not to be supposed that the Indians did not keep a watch upon the lodge.

They had learned by this time that their fair priestess longed to try her wings, and would take advantage of the first chance.

So well done had been Abe's work that they had not a suspicion so far.

It remained to be seen whether the balance of the plan could be carried out as well.

Abe was waiting now to hear the signal of the young ranger.

When this told him that the rangers were on hand, and their guns bearing upon the red camp, he would feel that the time had come to finish his part of the work.

To his consternation there suddenly came from the pass a wild yell, followed instantly by the sharp report of a firearm.

Confusion! all was ruined.

The old ranger saw that he could no longer hope to get the girl away unseen, for every warrior was on his feet.

If he delayed now all was lost, for some of the Apaches had already turned toward the lodge as if it was their duty to protect the girl in the event of an attack.

His quick glance showed him that these were only three in number.

Several others sprung toward the corral.

These were the horse-guards.

The main body of Indians, however, under the command of the chief Warlock, as he was known along the border, turned toward the spot from whence had come the alarm, and waited expectantly.

They knew not what was coming, but were ready for business if there was any bloody work to be done.

At the first alarm Arizona Abe had hoarsely whispered the words:

"Now, gal. Crawl through the grass. If ye'r diskivered, up an' foller me."

Dancing Feather was out of the lodge almost before he had finished.

Abe arose, and with his blanket stalked away.

He bore somewhat in the direction of the horses, as though he would make out that he were one of the guard.

That discovery was bound to come he knew to be a foregone conclusion, and was only endeavoring to make the best time while the period of uncertainty lasted.

The three braves advancing toward the skin lodge with long strides, had by this time reached it, and in another instant their shrill cries announced their discovery.

Quickly they bounded to the back of the lodge.

A fateful flash of lightning assisted them in discovering the young girl, who, as luck would have it, just at that juncture was in a spot where her shelter was thin.

They came leaping after her like hounds let loose from the leash.

Old Arizona knew there was no use in holding back his deadly bullet longer, and suddenly wheeling as the dusky trio dashed up, he sent the contents of his rifle into the body of the leading brave with such a vengeance that the fellow was doubled up like a jack-knife.

Then the gun was reversed in his hands as though by magic, and whirled about his head like a shillelah in the hands of a genuine Tipperary lad.

His blanket had fallen off, and the two Apaches could now see who it was opposed them with so much vigor.

One of them had hardly time to realize this before that whirling gunstock came in contact with his head and he was knocked completely out of time.

This left but one foe in the immediate vicinity, and upon him the ranger wheeled.

The Indian as he ran, had snatched up a lance that had been standing erect, having fastened to it the various possessions of its owner, perchance himself, which he had cast aside.

When Arizona whirled upon him this worthy was just in the act of thrusting his weapon through the indomitable old ranger.

Happily this result was averted by a sudden leap to one side on the part of Abe.

He felt that he could not afford to waste time with this vicious fellow, who prodded so earnestly with the lance.

Besides, an empty gun was hardly equal to a keen-pointed lance, and the Indian might with perfect immunity stand off and pin him through and through.

Time was a precious commodity just then.

Already others of the Apaches might be rushing in their direction, eager to take a hand in the game, and the old ranger felt that he had his hands full if he meant to rescue the girl.

This being the case, he snatched out a revolver and gave the fellow a shot just as he was about making another desperate jab at his opponent before he could get behind a tree as he believed Abe's intention to be.

That ended the matter as far as the red lancer was concerned at least.

He fell in a heap, and the lance, hurled some distance away, struck a tree sideways, the blow shivering the shaft to pieces.

By this time Dancing Feather had gone some little distance beyond.

Abe turned and hastily followed.

He was hotly pursued by a number of the Apaches, who stuck so close to his heels and tried to head him off, that he could not go the way he would have liked.

Thus against his will he was forced up among the rocks, over which he and his fair companion stumbled through the darkness.

Abe's admiration for the young girl was on the increase, and old misanthrope as he had always been, he could not help from putting out his bony arm and assisting her upward.

Like hungry wolves the Apaches came barking at their heels, and more than once Abe felt almost constrained to turn upon them.

The memory of the promise he had made to Tom was all that restrained him.

At last he struck a bonanza.

A narrow defile led upward to a ledge of rock that jutted out upon the face of a beetling cliff.

New hope inspired him when he came upon this place, and he saw an opportunity to ward off the desperate assaults that might soon be expected from his foes.

Hardly had they reached the top than a new sound broke the stillness of the night.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AN ATTACK FROM THE REAR.

THROUGH the strange basin beyond Buf-falo Gap, and along the precipitous mountain-side, rung the loud shouts of the rangers under bold Tucson Tom, as they dashed down upon the Apache camp like a whirlwind.

They had lost much of the advantage they had hoped to gain by a surprise, but were still ready to do the work that had brought them upon this trail.

The Indians were astonished at the sight that met their eyes with the next flash from the clouds.

They had heard no sound that would tell of the presence of such a force, and even now, as they came dashing forward, their steeds made no more noise than phantom horses.

As the wraps around the animals' heads were no longer of any value, they had been hastily snatched off by Tom and his men when they threw themselves into the saddle.

Many of the Apaches had mounted, and there was little confusion among them as the rangers dashed down.

Tucson Tom had been mightily amazed at the sight of the undaunted guard in the pass crawling out of the abyss for the second time.

Before he could move a hand or foot the fellow had discovered them, and this time he was bound to give the alarm.

Hardly had he done so than the revolver

of the ranger leader sounded his death-knell.

Knowing the folly of further secrecy after this, the whites had gone forward with all haste possible, and arrived upon the scene to find their enemies awaiting them.

To thus dash down upon five times their number of fierce warriors may have appeared a reckless undertaking, but those men were just the ones capable of it.

The conflict at once became furious.

Arizona Abe, from his elevated post, heard the sounds of strife with a burning desire to be in the midst of the melee, dealing fierce blows against the savage foe.

Strange how such a thought would come to him when there was every prospect that before long he would have his hands full where he was, and without going far to find it.

The Indians who had followed him had been near enough to see him enter the little defile, and he could expect to hear from them at any moment.

Abe lay down beside the spot where the defile debouched upon the ledge.

In his hands he held a knife and a revolver, which weapons he expected to use upon the dusky pursuers when they arrived.

He did not have long to wait.

The din of battle in the basin below prevented him from hearing any sound, yet something told him the enemy was near.

Abe was not fool enough to poke his head out in order to look down the defile. Such an act would stamp him a fool, as his head must be outlined against the gray arch above and present a fine mark for a lance or other weapon.

Instead, he lay flat upon the rock and held his revolver aimed at the point he knew the first Apache must appear.

No sooner did a head come into view, with its long straggly hair, than Abe pulled trigger.

There was a flash, a report and a whoop from the ill-fated brave, who vanished immediately as Abe knew he would.

Not wasting any time, the old ranger turned his revolver loose in the little defile, and cleared it in just six seconds.

It took four shots to do it.

From the yelps and groans that accompanied the clearing process, it was evident that all had not gone to the satisfaction of the Apaches.

When Abe's little smoke had cleared away he grimly smiled to find himself still master of the situation.

Then he noticed that the affair in the basin had also temporarily ceased.

Which had come off victor?

He looked earnestly, and was able to distinguish the dusky forms of Apache braves moving in and out among the camp-fires.

The sight gave him something of a shock.

This was an unexpected result.

Had the rangers been cleaned out, or, finding the Apaches too strong for them, had they retired in good order for the present?

He hoped this latter might be the case.

His attention was now brought back to his own situation, and the perils accompanying it.

The repulse of the rangers would leave Warlock and his whole band free to turn upon him.

How long could he hold out against such a horde of savage foes?

The thought did not bring a trace of fear to his heart, for with such weapons as he possessed he felt able to hold them at bay.

Ah! he must not forget that his rifle was empty, and but a single charge remained in his revolver.

When he went to reload he made a most alarming discovery.

Bullets he had in plenty, but his powder-horn was missing.

The string that sustained it over his shoulder, must have parted during his recent labor in effecting the release of the young girl, and the horn with its valuable contents no doubt lay at that moment in the Apache camp.

This knowledge sent a thrill through him.

The situation would have been serious in all respects, even though he possessed the means to reload his empty weapons.

As it was it looked almost hopeless.

Old Abe was not the man to give up while a breath remained in his body, and he only

shut his teeth more firmly together as he grasped his rifle by the barrel.

At least that was left him, and while he could wield it he would like to see one of the dusky devils gain the ledge by means of the defile.

He found some loose pieces of stone which he arranged in a row, ready to hurl down upon the heads of his foes, should the chance come.

By listening he was able to learn that the Apaches against whom he was individually pitted had received reinforcements from the main body.

No doubt they would soon be ready to try it again, perhaps on a different scale.

Silence had again fallen upon the basin, and the old prairieman, crouching there awaiting his prey could now tell when the assault was coming, for the Indians, cunning though they were, could not move so silently that his keen ears did not hear them.

He nerved himself for the ordeal.

At the proper time he began toppling the rocks over into the defile, and hurling others downward with great force.

A scene of confusion ensued.

If a brave by some chance succeeded in reaching the top of the defile, the old ranger would snatch up his rifle and with one sweep hurl the fellow back to where he could get his full share of the falling rocks.

It began to look as though the Apaches had undertaken a most exceedingly difficult task when they set about assaulting the old man's position from this quarter.

They knew what they were at, however.

The attack in the front, though exceedingly desperate, was nothing more than a blind to cover operations in the rear.

As yet Arizona Abe did not suspect this.

He had not thoroughly examined his fort, but had apparently taken it for granted that it was impregnable from any side excepting that upon which the defile was located.

In this he was mistaken.

The agile Apaches had boldly set to work to scale the rocky wall.

During the hour or so that had elapsed between the first attack and that which Abe was now engaged in repelling, the bold climbers had been busily at work, and by the assistance of the lightning, that still flashed at long intervals, they had about succeeded in their dashing undertaking.

While Abe was kept busy at work at one end of the little plateau, he heard a cry from the young girl.

She had offered more than once to aid him, and had even insisted upon carrying stones to where he could get them, but Abe had kindly yet firmly insisted upon her remaining back out of the way of any flying missiles such as bullets or arrows which the angry Apaches might send up the little defile in the hope of hitting the bold man who defied their power.

When he heard this cry from her lips, the old scout knew something terrible had come to pass, and he gave a grunt as he turned his head to see what it was.

Just at this very moment, as though to favor the beleaguered trapper, and show him what new peril he had to face, the lightning flashed athwart the sullen sky.

What he saw was not calculated to reassure old Abe to any extent.

The lightning only illuminated the scene for the space of three seconds, but this was time enough.

He saw Dancing Feather struggling in the arms of a stalwart brave, while one or two faces, crowned by long black hair, and looking like the countenances of fiends incarnate, were above the edge of the ledge.

Another ten seconds and all would be lost.

These fellows would come down upon him in the rear like a storm-cloud, and he dared not leave his post for a second.

Arizona Abe clinched his teeth and drew his revolver for his last shot.

CHAPTER XL.

THE DANGLING ROPE.

By this time hope had well-nigh departed from the breast of the old ranger.

Nobly had he struggled against the odds that had been hurled against him, but this was too much even for such a hero.

He had seen more than one such desperate

situation in that eventful life of his, and yet this did not take away any of the power that invested the situation.

Thus far, the Apaches who were endeavoring to get at him by means of the defile had been gallantly kept in check.

Abe knew that his safety lay in seeing that they remained below.

Once let them get up and there was no telling where they would end.

Hence, in spite of the inclination he felt to rush to the assistance of Dancing Feather and relieve her from her peril, he knew that to desert his post even for so short a time would be fatal.

There was another thing that Arizona Abe caught an inkling of.

He had believed that the Apaches had reached the ledge wholly by climbing up the face of the cliff.

This conclusion was a natural one, for he had seen them in the act of pulling themselves over as that flash of lightning momentarily illuminated the scene.

Another fitful flash followed close upon the heels of this one.

As Abe's attention was riveted upon the place where this exciting little drama was in progress, he saw something that took him aback and swamped his previous opinions.

A human form was dangling in mid-air.

It hung suspended by a rope from above, and was only a few feet above the ledge when thus brought into view.

This proved that not only were the Apaches climbing the face of the cliff, but they were also descending from above.

No wonder the brave old ranger felt his heart sink.

He could not see the slightest chance for success in the game.

True, while he continued to push the loose rocks over into the defile, upon the yelling Indians below, he held in his right hand his revolver, with one charge still in the cylinder, ready to shoot down the first man who appeared before him.

After that he could battle for his life with his clubbed rifle, and yield only when some warrior's weapon reached his heart.

To his surprise he heard the sharp report of a firearm near by.

It was of course one of the Apaches, sending a bullet in his direction to see if he could lay the bold ranger low, and Abe even imagined he heard its peculiar whistle close by his ear.

Ha! what meant that yell?

He had heard too many Apache death-cries not to know one when it came?

Had one of the bold climbers missed his hold when near the top of the cliff, and tumbled to the bottom?

Hardly that, for the cry had not come from the depths, but had proceeded from some one on the ledge.

Had Dancing Feather possessed a weapon?

He was positive that this was not so, else he might have believed it was she who had met the cunning Apaches with a flank fire.

Strange how thoughts will go through the mind with the speed of the wind.

Abe had time to think thus, even though close upon the heels of the wild death-cry came a second report and another yell.

Then it flashed upon the ranger.

He could hardly believe the truth.

Help had come!

The dangling figure he had momentarily seen hanging between earth and sky, had not been an Indian after all.

Some friend had come down from above, and was even then engaged with the Apaches on the ledge!

Who was it?

Abe could readily guess.

Who among the little band of rangers would be likely to thus risk life and limb for the young girl but Tucson Tom?

If it was he, then victory was assured.

He would sweep the enemy from the ledge in a short space of time.

Already had his revolver sounded the death-knell of two.

Eagerly Abe awaited the next flash, with his revolver ready to do its work.

He could hear the panting of struggling men, and knew that a battle for life and death was in progress close by.

A slip of the foot and both combatants would be hurled over the edge to their doom.

It was awful to think of being so near

his friend and yet unable to lend him any assistance.

Perhaps Tom did not need any help—perhaps—ah! the lightning at last.

It was a flash of unusual duration.

What Arizona Abe saw was enough to give him a true insight into the situation.

Tucson Tom and a burly Apache were engaged in a hand-to-hand conflict for the mastery, and at the very instant of the flash the Bowie Bravo had succeeded in getting his enemy where he wanted him, and had his arm drawn back to deal him the fatal blow.

This wretch was undoubtedly the fellow whom Dancing Feather had been struggling with, for she was near by, on one knee, her hands clasped and her face wearing an expression of anxiety as she saw the scene before her.

All this the old ranger saw instantly.

Even more presented itself.

Just back of Tucson Tom was a tall brave who had a tomahawk in his hand which he meant to bury in the brain of the ranger.

Beyond this the ledge was clear, as Tom had sent the other fellows over with bullets lodged in their bodies.

It was not necessary that any great length of time should be wasted in Arizona Abe's bringing his revolver to bear upon this worthy.

Such an action can be carried out in the wink of an eyelid.

As the brief illumination caused by the electric fluid passed away, Abe's finger pressed the trigger, and another sharp report rung out upon the night air.

It was a lucky thing for Tom that the old ranger aimed well.

That tomahawk must else have done its terrible work.

As the bullet crashed through the brain of the Apache, he whirled blindly around and fell heavily to the rock.

At the same instant a gurgling cry from the fellow whom Tom had hold of told that the latter's bowie had done its awful work.

Heaven was kind to the whites.

The red wolves below as though realizing what the fate of their comrades had been, now gave up their mad attempt to reach the ledge through the defile.

This had only been a blind as was now made clear.

When Abe realized that there was no longer any immediate danger to be feared from this quarter, he made his way back on the ledge and presently had the hand of Tucson Tom in his own horny palm.

He could hardly believe things had come to pass in such a strange manner, and that he was still in the land of the living when he had given up the case as hopeless.

Tucson Tom quickly gave the ranger all information necessary concerning his comrades, what they had done and what it was intended to do in the near future.

They had found the Apaches too strong for their force, and after a brief engagement had wisely withdrawn with a loss of one man killed and several wounded.

When the situation of Arizona and his charge was made known to them they had left their horses and mounting the steep elevation managed, by taking a roundabout way to reach a point above the situation of the two who were at bay on the ledge.

Then it was not a difficult matter to fasten a couple of lassoes together and lower Tucson Tom over the ledge.

He had come down during a period of darkness and flattened himself out against the rock when half-way to the bottom, so that any of the Indians who might be looking upward would not see him, as he would present a fine mark for their guns if discovered.

We have already seen how he was near the ledge at the time the Indians appeared in Arizona's rear, and with what wonderful sagacity and nerve he had assaulted the dusky dogs the very second of his arrival.

Dancing Feather clung to her lover with all the fervor of a true heart that had felt the terror and alarm of death clutching at her soul when she saw him in danger.

His last act had endeared him to her more than ever, and she was ready to obey his slightest wish, such was the love and reverence she felt for Tom.

The Indians had met with a rebuff, but they were not defeated, and it would only be

a question of time before they again set about some of their deviltry.

Before this could be accomplished it behooved our friends to devise a plan of escape, and they could not set about this any too soon.

CHAPTER XLI.

SMOKED OUT.

THE Indians believed they had those whom they sought to destroy in a position where there could be no escape.

If they held the pass above so that the red wolves could not ascend, the Apaches had control of the lower part so that the whites could not leave their elevated position.

When, therefore, they found themselves defeated in one sense, they turned their attention to another point.

Our friends above had just reached the conclusion that something must be done before daylight came and found them in such a position, when the old ranger began acting in a queer manner.

He raised his head and snuffed at the air in a singular way.

"What is it?" asked Tom.

"Smoke," replied the other, laconically.

"That means a fire."

"Yes. Take a smell an' see if ye recognize ther odor."

Now that his attention was called to the matter, the young hunter could recognize the pungent odor of a weed which if burned when dry, would be sufficient to make a bear weep.

He mentioned the name of it.

"That's correct, boyee. That's another thing. Ye don't see much light."

Tom saw that the old ranger spoke the truth.

The real nature of the case broke in upon him suddenly.

Fires had been started by the Indians, who had grown desperate and were determined to have their priestess dead or alive.

The smoke from these fires was expected to ascend and envelop those on the ledge in a dense cloud that would make life so utterly unbearable that they would either leap into eternity or else descend the defile.

Of course in the event of this latter coming to pass, the Apaches would be lying in waiting ready to seize upon them.

The situation was far from pleasant—indeed, it promised to become desperate.

Tucson Tom went to the edge of the rock to learn where the smoke came from.

Far down below he could see three red spots that looked like the glowing orbs of a triple-eyed monster lying in wait.

He needed not to be told that these were the fires that were expected to accomplish their destruction.

The Indians had covered them with green weeds and grass, wet from the recent rain, and thus they smoldered, throwing up an ever-increasing volume of pungent smoke.

He was compelled to draw back his head because of the choking and painful sensation brought about by the smoke.

A breath of air would have been a relief, but a dead calm seemed to have settled over the place, so that the smoke curling up the face of the cliff, enveloped them in its folds.

Abe and Tom looked at one another when the light of a flash from above came.

The situation was indeed grave.

They found some difficulty in breathing and this grew worse rather than better as the time went by.

Were they doomed to meet such a death?

Was there no escape?

Possibly the strange things that had followed one another in such quick succession had served to demoralize Tucson Tom.

He was not exactly himself.

When a man loses his mind even partially, he becomes like wild turkeys in a trap, running blindly around the sides in their endeavor to get out, and never thinking of looking at the hole in the middle, by means of which they had entered.

So Tom, in trying to think of some unusual means of leaping the ledge, wholly ignored the one method which he had had in view when coming upon it.

It was left to Arizona Abe to think of it.

"Ther rope!"

Tucson Tom gave vent to an ejaculation when he heard these words fall from his companion's lips.

He knew then that a chance still remained—that all was not yet lost.

The rope, by means of which he had descended—was it still dangling there?

As though to answer his question, one of the fires below flashed up at this moment, and there, swaying to and fro, was the rope.

He put out his hand and clutched it.

As a code of signals had been arranged with his companions above, he could now communicate with them.

There was a loop at the end of the lower lasso, and this had held Tom's foot.

He now called Dancing Feather to his side, and explained to her what it was intended she should do.

The brave girl did not flinch, although it was an ordeal that might have made the bravest turn pale.

To make assurance doubly sure, Tom fastened the rope to her waist by means of his belt, so that, even though she grew dizzy and let go her hold, she would not fall.

This done, he made a signal to those above, and felt them draw his loved one out of his reach.

He held his breath with suspense.

The smoke was too dense to admit of seeing her progress, and he was fain to imitate the example of old Abe and hold his face close to the rock in order to secure better air.

"Tom, yer turn next," said Abe.

"Never, old friend! I shall go last," returned the ranger, firmly.

Arizona Abe grunted.

"This hyar won't do. When ther rope comes, not a second is ter be lost, 'cause ther last 'un must hev a poor show as 'tis. See hyar, I'm ther oldest. Let me stay."

"I'm the younger. I'll be last!"

"Then thar's only one way. We must draw fur it."

Abe found a pebble.

"Which hand, Tom? Ther feller az gits ther stone stays."

Tucson Tom, without hesitation, slapped the old ranger's left hand, and opening it, took out the pebble.

Arizona Abe grunted again, but could not say anything, for all had been fairly done.

"Makes me think o' ther time, years ago, when I drew a black bean down in Mexico, and war ter be shot along wid ther rest o' ther poor boyees; but I reckon I guv 'em ther slip."

They said no more, for it was foolish to open their mouths when the smoke came so densely.

Minutes passed by.

They seemed hours to the men who crouched there and gasped for breath; still no sign came to their ears to indicate that Dancing Feather had gotten safely up.

It was becoming unendurable.

The pungent smoke penetrated their lungs in spite of all their efforts to restrain it, and breathing became difficult and painful.

Tucson Tom looked up as a faint flash of lightning momentarily illumined the scene, and he saw the rope cutting the light like a black seam down the face of the cliff.

Gladly he seized hold of it, and placed the noose in Abe's hand.

The old ranger, knowing that nothing could alter the determination of his companion, did not again attempt to urge him to take his place, but made use of every second of time so that Tom should suffer as little as possible.

He slipped his foot in the loop, grasped hold of the rope, and was drawn up.

Tom again threw himself to the rocky flooring, and endeavored to get a breath of air.

He even contemplated moving into the defile, as this was perhaps more free from smoke, but upon investigating he found that a fire had also been built in this channel, and a new column of smoke was winding its sinuous way upward, to add new torture to his position.

Only by hugging the rock at the point where cliff and ledge met could he get any relief whatever from the torture.

His eyes seemed bursting from his head, and his tongue was so parched and dry that it appeared ready to crack open.

How terrible it was!

Every fiber of his being was thrilled with the sensation until his whole body ached and smarted as though a myriad of wasps had stung him.

To add to the horror of his situation, he felt his brain throbbing as though it would burst, and he found staring him in the face the possibility that he might go mad.

At least the young girl was safe!

That thought gave him satisfaction in his darkest moment.

She would be taken to civilization by his friends, and Francisco the snake-charmer would see to it that she was saved from the machinations of that woman.

What was this strange feeling creeping over him like a lethargy?

Was it death?

He shook himself as might a man who overtaken by a storm finds his senses becoming lost in a sense of warmth, after having passed through bitter coldness.

Again he felt this lethargy creeping upon him, and he had more difficulty in arousing himself, but just then a Heaven-sent breath of air was wafted across the ledge.

It revived him and he staggered erect.

Something struck him a smart blow on the side of the head that in his weak condition made him reel, and he put up his hand.

Thank Heaven! the rope!

CHAPTER XLII.

HOW TOM WAS SAVED.

THERE was one chance left.

Tucson Tom's brave heart leaped within its prison walls, and the blood bounding through his arteries seemed to give him a new lease of life.

Thicker than ever came the smoke, after that one breath of air had been wafted across the little plateau.

Tom knew that his strength might give out at any moment, and he wisely made a slip loop at the end of the rope and placed it around his body just under his arms.

Even if he did swoon away he would be drawn to the top, where the fresh air might revive him again.

The signal was given and Tom felt himself raised from the shelf.

Up, up he went through the darkness and smoke, and his senses again reeled.

Then there was a sudden stoppage in the ascent.

Tom heard a wild cry above, and a heavy object went flying through the air past him, rushing downward with fearful velocity.

Just Heaven! it was a man!

What awful mystery was this?

Again the ascent was resumed; steadily he was drawn aloft by those strong brave arms.

Then the top was reached, and he was pulled over by more than one pair of hands.

Tucson Tom had swooned.

The strain upon nature had been too fierce.

Tenderly they carried him to a spot where the smoke did not come and laid him down.

The cool night air soon revived him.

When the ranger came to, it was to find bending over him Dancing Feather, in whose lap his head was pillowed, and Arizona Abe, who had hold of his hand.

The others stood around, conversing in low tones, and when it was learned that Tom was himself again, they were only with difficulty restrained from giving vent to their exultation in cheers.

Such a course would not have been wise.

Better that the Indians should believe those they sought were still upon the little plateau, for escape would thus be easier.

How was this?

Tom suddenly became aware that his men lacked one in point of number. At the same moment there flashed through his mind the recollection of the dark form that had shot downward through space while he was suspended between heaven and earth.

"Who is missing?" he demanded.

The men looked at one another, and then as though seeing there was no way of avoiding the truth, one said:

"Matamoras Pedro."

"He went over the hight?"

"Yes."

"Was it an accident?"

"No: he was thrown over."

"By whom?"

The man had not time to answer.

"'Twar me did it, Tom," said Arizona Abe.

"How's this, Abe?"

"I've s'pected ther critter fur some time back, on account o' ther looks he guv ye when ye warn't lookin'. I see'd him draw his knife an' make a slash at ther rope when we war pullin' yer up. He thort no one saw him do it, but we did, an' I sent him over ther edge, knife an' all, quicker nor yer could say Jack Robinson. It war a lucky thing he missed ther rope, I tell-ee, Tom. One o' ther strands war cut, but afore it could part ther men had caught it beyond."

"What Abe says are gospel," chipped in a gaunt hunter.

"Why did he desire my death?" said Tom half-musingly.

"Cap'n, ain't yer got no enemies in Tucson?"

Tom started.

This shot had struck home!

Yes, he had deadly foes.

Cortina and the mysterious woman were such, and the man who had attempted his life being of Cortina's nationality, might easily be a member of his gang.

His good angel had been on guard, however, and saved him through the instrumentality of old Abe.

The next thing on the programme was to reach their horses and retreat through the pass.

By this time the Apaches had come to the conclusion that their work was done, and the death of the man whom Abe had hurled down the precipitous descent would aid them in reaching this end, for it was natural to believe that this fellow was the man who had defied them, and that he had leaped to death rather than await it by suffocation.

Some of them advanced up the defile, and meeting with no resistance, reached the ledge.

Their amazement at finding it occupied only by one of their own dead braves was intense, and presently their cries announced that scouts and spies had been sent out through the whole immediate neighborhood to discover some traces of those they sought.

Hence, it was not very strange that the little band of whites in making their descent from the elevation where they had been of so much benefit to Tom and his betrothed, were discovered.

Possibly some action of their own hastened this discovery, for on account of the gloomy nature of the night, and their entire unfamiliarity with their surroundings, they were apt to make some noise.

When the shouts of the Indians informed them that they were massing for an attack, our friends held themselves in readiness for such work.

Tucson Tom was himself again.

He now showed his sterling qualities as a leader of men.

He knew the Apaches were worked up to such a pitch of excitement, that abandoning their usual caution for the time being they would be apt to rush headlong upon their foes.

For this he prepared his men.

Calmly they awaited the assault.

The fires lighted by the Indians had seized upon fuel that lay near, and were every moment growing larger in volume, so that by degrees, the darkness was being dissipated in the direction from whence they expected their foes.

Nearer came the Indians.

Their diabolical yells made the welkin ring as they leaped forward like enraged panthers.

"Ready boys!"

There were but ten of them now, but those ten were a host in themselves.

Guns were raised and the clicking of hammers—fatal sound—could be heard.

Hal! the enemy was now in sight, and yet no command to fire.

Tucson Tom was waiting.

He knew what was necessary in order to strike terror to those savage hearts. The volley must be a deadly one.

Closer still came the dusky swarm. The fires they had kindled were destined to seal the doom of many among them.

They had reached a point within sixty feet of the whites when Tucson Tom gave the word.

Suddenly there burst upon the quivering

air a terrific report that drowned the yells of the advancing Indians.

It was the crash of ten true rifles.

The utmost demoralization ensued among the Indians as this storm of lead flew into their midst.

Before they could recover the whites had replaced their rifles with revolvers, and again the battle of firearms began.

This was too much for Apache bravery.

They had suffered terribly from the leaden messengers of death, and the sight of that sheet of flame leaping out from among the trees into their faces as it seemed, was demoralizing.

The whites saw them turn, and their shouts of victory must have been peculiarly exasperating to the Indians.

Tom knew that it would be foolhardy to attempt a pursuit.

The darkness would bewilder his men and some of them might fall into the hands of the Apaches, who were liable to change their tactics at any moment.

His only thought was to withdraw from the spot while there was yet time, and make good their escape to the town.

This being the case, he drew back his men and left the scene of their victory.

They made something of a circuit and finally reached their horses.

All was as they had left them, and in a brief space of time they had mounted and were heading for the gap.

This they reached in good time.

The main body of Indians was searching for them along the side of the mountain, but the precaution had been taken to send a trio of warriors to guard the pass.

When these worthies betrayed their presence they brought down stern fate upon their heads in the shape of a shower of bullets.

The pass was now open.

True, back of them came a howling mob of infuriated red-skins, but whenever they got too close, Tucson Tom would give an order to some of his men who, turning, let the dusky demons know of their presence in thunder tones, through their rifles.

They had no more fear of the result.

The Apaches had been badly whipped and also outwitted as far as cunning went.

Once on the other side our friends would have no need to lead their horses, but mounting, would gallop away over the plain toward Tucson, able to laugh at pursuit.

CHAPTER XLIII.

CONCLUSION.

THE end of Buffalo Gap was reached at last, and our friends found themselves upon the open ground once more.

They rode on until daybreak.

When they halted to prepare something to eat, an observation from a piece of rising ground showed them the Apaches following like a pack of hounds.

They were some miles away, but the whites did not care to have them closer, so the breakfast was hastily disposed of, and they were again in the saddle.

Tom and Mabel rode to one side engaged in earnest conversation.

After a time the ranger beckoned to the snake charmer, who joined them.

By degrees a most remarkable story was brought to light.

Francisco, some sixteen years previous had been a friend of a certain wealthy Don, whose name, De Guzman, was known throughout the whole of northern Mexico.

This man was a widower, with one child, a daughter.

There lived with the family at their grand hacienda a young woman who claimed to be a sister of the Don, but upon whom some of the families in their circle were wont to look with suspicion.

Down upon this peaceful scene came the Apaches one night, leaving blood and ruins in their path.

The old Don was killed, his child carried away, and the place sacked.

There were those who whispered later that the work was not that of Indians, but the men of a noted *contrabandista*, Cortina by name, who, disguised as Apaches, were wont to commit such depredations.

There were other stories hinted about the young woman being in the plot, as she escaped from the so-called Apaches in a mysterious manner, and came into possession of

all that the Don had owned, but no one had ever spoken these things openly, being afraid of her power, and even then the name of Cortina was one not to be lightly spoken on the border.

Francisco had worked hard to solve the mystery of the child's disappearance, and what had become of it.

So earnest were his efforts that he had fallen under the ban of the young woman's displeasure, and mysterious men had on more than one occasion waylaid him and attempted his life.

Finally he had given the matter up.

Years had passed by since then and it was only recently that he had learned a few important facts through the dying confession of a man who had once been a member of Cortina's band, and whom he had been able to serve at the time of his being shot.

This man had taken part in the diabolical deed of sixteen years before.

He declared that the assailants were in part real Apaches, the remainder being the men of Cortina disguised.

They were apparently working under the orders of some person, and that this was a woman, he knew from having seen his chief in consultation with her many times.

The child, being beautiful, had captivated an Indian chief, and he had carried it off with him, a thing that suited Cortina just as well no doubt, for he made no demur.

These things, put with what Dancing Feather could tell of her past, as she had heard it from the white lady captive, the wife of the chief, and who had educated her, made as plain a story as one could wish.

The infernal motive of the plotting woman was now as clear as day.

She had enjoyed the De Guzman estates for sixteen years now, and the bare thought of giving them up had so filled her with dread that she could no longer rest easy while that girl was alive, even though in the heart of Apache-land and never likely to annoy her.

Strange how justice will often use the very fears of a rogue to overwhelm him.

If this woman had not plotted with Cortina toward the death of Dancing Feather, Tucson Tom might never have rescued her, or at least the chances were small that the waif of the Indian country would appear as the legitimate heiress to the De Guzman property.

That the young girl should appear deeply interested in the story was natural.

She had often longed to know her identity and find her parents, if living, or their graves, if dead.

It was finally determined to enter Tucson by night, and leave before the next dawn for Mexico, so that they might establish the truth without delay, and have a royal greeting for the woman-plotter in case she made an attempt to return to the hacienda.

This was the best that could be done, for this woman had the assistance of the noted Cortina, and they would be apt to give them trouble if the chance occurred.

When the Apaches found their pursuit was hopeless, they drew in and headed back in the direction of Buffalo Gap.

Since first meeting with Tucson Tom they had suffered heavily at the hands of the whites and the forces of nature, so that there must be mourning in their town among the mountains for many a moon.

Thus relieved from all danger in the rear, Tucson Tom's little party moved on at an easier pace, and was enabled to enter the town during the darkness.

As Tom, his two comrades, Abe and the snake-charmer, together with Francisco, were leaving later on, they were discovered by one of Cortina's men who reported to his chief.

Through this means it eventually reached the ears of the plotting woman.

She was wild with apprehension, her guilty heart realizing what the mission of this little band must be.

Liberal offers were heard to Cortina for his assistance, and at daybreak a party of eight started off after the others.

Among them was the plotting woman in disguise.

They finally came up with the objects of their search, found them in camp asleep, and creeping up sprung forward to dispose of them in an expeditious manner, when from

the bushes close by a fusilade was poured into their ranks, and the four who got away, including the king of border terrors himself, understood that they had fallen into a trap, and that the figures upon the ground were dummies, while those they had intended to slay were hidden near by.

As the wicked woman plotter was among those who had fallen, Cortina had no further object to serve in following those who had dealt him so many harsh blows save revenge, and he was too shrewd a man to cut his nose off to spite the rest of his face.

Our friends were never troubled again by the Tiger of the Border.

They reached the De Guzman hacienda in safety, and the necessary steps were gone through with to prove the young girl's identity.

This was not hard to do, and the matter ended by her being triumphantly installed in the home of her father from whence she had been torn sixteen years before.

The name of Mabel had been given her by the white squaw of the old chief, who had died a few years ago, but her proper name as the child of Rafael de Guzman was Clarabel.

Arizona Abe never had reason to regret his services in her behalf.

He was always sure of a welcome when down in this locality, and he looked forward to such visits with pleasure, for the poor old man had never known any of the domestic bliss he saw here displayed, and it touched his heart.

Tucson Tom and his love were wedded shortly after their arrival.

The Mexicans thereabout soon learned to look upon him with respect, because of his many sterling qualities.

Whatever Tom's sad past, it contained nothing that he need be ashamed of, and his wife only loved him the more when he confided the story to her sympathetic ears.

The Apaches never learned what had become of their fair god, as they no longer raided as far into Mexico as had been the case years before, at the time the young girl was stolen from her home.

No doubt they filled her place with one already in their power, and tried to forget the past, though the havoc in their lodges must ever be a reminder of it.

Reader, our story is done.

To-day in sunny Mexico lives our valiant Tom Andrews and his sweet wife, she whom we have followed over dangerous trails as Dancing Feather the fair god.

Their children have grown up around them, and just at present the two boys are away on a long hunting-tour, in company with the old scalps hunter, Arizona Abe, who delights to teach them all the secrets in his keeping.

A young girl, the image of her mother at that age is the third child.

In the midst of such happiness we take leave of those in whose company we have traveled over prairie and mountain, from the Apache town to Clarabel's old home in Mexico.

THE END.

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